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THE UNMARRIED (M)OTHER: A STUDY OF CHRISTIANITY, CAPITALISM,
AND COUNTERNARRATIVES CONCERNING MOTHERHOOD AND MARRIAGE
IN THE UNITED STATES AND SOUTH AFRICA

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THE UNMARRIED (M)OTHER: A STUDY OF CHRISTIANITY, CAPITALISM, AND
COUNTERNARRATIVES CONCERNING MOTHERHOOD AND MARRIAGE
IN THE UNITED STATES AND SOUTH AFRICA

A Dissertation Presented to the Graduate Faculty of

Dedman College

Southern Methodist University

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

with a

Major in Religious Studies

by

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December 21, 2019

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The Unmarried (M)Other: A Study of Christianity, Capitalism, and
Counternarratives Concerning Motherhood and Marriage
in the United States and South Africa

Advisor: Dr. Joerg Rieger

Doctor of Philosophy conferred December 21, 2019

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A reified and patriarchal form of Christianity that emphasizes “family values” – that is, adherence to the formula of a male-headed, heterosexual, capitalist, nuclear family, characterized by distinct, complementary, and hierarchical gender roles as essential to the well-being of individuals, one’s nation, and the ecumenical Church - over “community values” has become a happy bedfellow of the market system and neocolonialism, extending its reach worldwide through globalization. The result is that single mothers constitute the most economically oppressed demographic internationally across all race and ethnic categories. Using Constructivist Grounded Theory and a postcolonial feminist theological lens to collect, retell, and evaluate the stories of single mothers in cross-cultural fieldwork in both the United States and South Africa, this project will analyze the factors, theologies, and practices embodied and created by Christian single mothers that either empower social activism and collective identity or undermine the motivation and means to organize for liberating social action for single mothers.

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I hope I make you proud.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2007, Jennifer Maggio committed her time and resources to establishing The Life of the Single Mom Ministries, one of the only Christian ministries of its kind, which seeks to connect unmarried mothers to churches, equip churches to address the needs of these women and their families, and empower single mothers¹. A single mother herself, Maggio has founded this organization on the two key beliefs: first, that education is a key to ending single-parent families' dependence on government assistance, and second, that faith communities have the potential to impact the lives of single mothers. According to the non-profit's website, The Life of the Single Mom Ministries has aided over 22,000 single parents and worked with over 1,500 churches domestically and internationally to reach out to and assist single parents. As her biography reads, a teenage Maggio reached her turning point when she was pregnant for the fourth time, receiving government assistance, and living in public housing. In a moment of self-determination, "Maggio made a decision that she would not only survive but learn to thrive"; over the next few years, Maggio became an award-winning businesswoman in a Fortune 500 company before founding The Life of the Single Mom Ministries.

Her website includes a scrolling panoply of statistics, such as "78% of our prison population was raised by single mothers," and each night "1,000 teenagers become single moms." A key statistic that Maggio cites is that less than 1% of churches have a sustainable

¹ The Life of the Single Mom Ministries, accessed July 18, 2014, <http://thelifeofasinglemom.com/>

single mothers' ministry, thus indicating the impetus behind The Life of the Single Mom Ministries. This non-profit helps Christian churches begin ministries for single mothers that provide resources for financial education, parenting, and emotional health, as well as Bible studies and social activities. In reading this website critically, three aspects of Maggio's organization become apparent: 1) the organization views single motherhood as a major social liability, 2) the local church ministries being proposed are intended to be beneficial to church growth, and 3) the local church ministries are not intended to address – or even recognize – any systemic constructs that may place single mothers in a vulnerable position.

Based on the rhetoric used to retell Maggio's story and the statistics cited on the website, The Life of the Single Mom Ministries clearly views single motherhood as a moral and social evil that leads to further social degradation. Significantly, the website targets single mothers without addressing the absence of fathers or the role that men play in conception. Instead, we are told through the statistical quotations that the majority of convicts are raised by single mothers. Given that evangelical Christians in the United States (certainly amongst other populations) frequently cite single motherhood among the ills of society as though it were the evil in itself rather than just a different familial structure, this may be taken to imply that single mothers do a poor job of parenting, that women are deficient when it comes to instilling morality in their children, that the abandonment by fathers plays no mentionable role in creating the mindsets of these convicts, and, finally, that the poverty, stress, and social situations faced by single mothers attempting to navigate an economic system and society that privileges male-headed nuclear families is not responsible for the crimes committed by these mothers' offspring. Furthermore, on the page explicating why the organization carries out its mission, it states that

those who lead these single mothers' groups "teach single parents to also learn to serve others," as though this is something foreign and secondary to single mothers' nature.

While *The Life of the Single Mom Ministries* does explicitly aim to aid single mothers in achieving some form of empowerment, it also possesses a strong interest in leveraging single-mother ministries to benefit the churches' attendance. Of the eight bullet points communicating why this non-profit exists, three of them plainly mention the attendance boom benefiting churches that begin single-parent ministries, one of them cites churches' need for resources and support to launch these ministries, and one refers to the benefit of teaching single mothers to serve others (plausibly in the church setting). A minority of the bullet points actually directed the benefits of the ministries explicitly and specifically to single mothers. Although the statements referring to single parents' increased attendance at churches could be construed as a benefit to the single parents themselves (on the assumption that church attendance is an ameliorating force in these women's lives), these statistics are almost positively a boon to the church, which benefits from higher attendance numbers, a larger volunteer pool, greater financial giving through tithes and offerings, and an increase in available resources. Church attendance for single mothers, while hopefully a positive thing as well, is a more ambivalent experience, since church settings may pose the danger of moral judgment, censure, and stigma, increased demands on their time, and stress regarding feelings of obligation to tithe already-tight funds.

Finally, *The Life of the Single Mom Ministries* seems to indicate that what lies between single mothers and their success is the need for self-determination and willpower, both of which ostensibly can be gained through spiritual inspiration through church involvement and through small-group accountability. The rhetoric surrounding Maggio's own decision to "turn her life around," plus the emphasis on financial and parenting education, appear to indicate that the

major roadblock a single mother encounters is the limitations she places on herself. Certainly, parenting and financial education, as well as spiritual guidance and accountability with other like-minded women are powerful tools for single mothers and may be vital to ensuring the thriving of single-parent households. However, nowhere on this website does The Life of the Single Mom Ministries display any regard for the deeper, even systemic, causes of the struggles faced by single mothers. Instead, the current emphasis on self-determination and education appears to function as a counterweight or reversal to the weakness, lack of healthful relationships, ambition, and ignorance that society perceives as characterizing women who become pregnant outside of marriage. This organization does not advertise any advocacy for and engagement with policy issues such as living wage campaigns, socialized or subsidized childcare, more stringent child support laws, scholarships for mothers, and better job opportunities for single moms – nor do they deploy churches’ resources to join these struggles. Hence, The Life of the Single Mom Ministries furthers the myth of the Protestant work ethic and its supposed guaranteed rewards and the emphasis on individual or privatized success for single mothers. Thus, this organization maintains the patriarchal structure of capitalism in which we are each responsible for our own triumphs and failures – even when those who seem to experience the greatest triumphs are men and those who experience the greatest financial “failures” are women.

In the United States, women bear the brunt of caregiving and have fewer economic resources to do so than do men or even women in many other countries. In fact, full-time workers in the United States who earn minimum wage and are raising just one child on their

income are still below the official poverty line.² The majority of single parents are female, and only half of these single mothers receive child support; but even if all fathers in the United States paid child support, 75% of U.S. families living in poverty would stay poor unless mothers found well-paying jobs. However, this is easier said than done. White women in the United States earn on average \$.78 for every dollar that a white male earns, and women of color earn significantly less than even this. To make matters worse, U.S. women's earnings decline an average of \$3,000 in the first year after the birth of a child. When we consider the aforementioned tendencies and statistics, it is no surprise that the majority of our nation's "poor" are women and children, and of those adult women, the vast majority hold jobs, thus constituting a socioeconomic class often ignored in conversations about capitalism – the working poor.

Neoliberalism, the term used to describe the latest iteration of capitalism in "developed" countries like the United States, is characterized by increasing globalization of markets and technology, privatization, market deregulation, and free trade. Patriarchy, the system of male domination and male-centeredness that operates both overtly and insidiously in a society, predates capitalism by a long shot and has appeared in various iterations throughout history and across geographical spaces and cultures. Patriarchy is the centralizing of power in the hands of those who possess or support the superiority of a particular set of hypermasculine traits and suppress, limit, or denigrate traits deemed to be feminine. The primary feature of patriarchy is a particular form and operation of power – specifically, power as domination over or of "the other", and those who dominate also have the power to determine acceptable "norms" and values in society. The closer one replicates these norms or values, the more one benefits from the flow

² UC Davis Center for Poverty Research, "What are the annual earnings for a full-time wage worker?" August 30, 2016, <https://poverty.ucdavis.edu/faq/what-are-annual-earnings-full-time-minimum-wage-worker>

of power from those at the center outward – but benefits do not necessarily equal power, and power in a patriarchal system exists on a spectrum. Because the norms and “rules” of society are set and controlled by those with the ability to dominate over others, those in the power center tend to replicate the norms and ensure that new additions to the power center do not challenge or deviate from these norms. Thus, men have successfully retained a lion’s share of power in such societies and establish rules, laws, and norms that honor the status quo that got them to power. However, not all men benefit from patriarchy; in fact, most men do not. Patriarchy values a narrow range of traits and requires not only the right connections to the power center but also exact replication and performance of the norms. Most men – and women – lie outside of the power center, but they gain benefits from patriarchal systems in as much as they replicate these norms, especially the norm of embracing the idea of power as domination.

Patriarchy is basically an organizing concept, a means of controlling the flow of power in society from the top down. Humankind historically possesses a basic fear of chaos and has since its inception attempted to construct ways to order the chaos or prevent chaos and disorder from erupting. Therefore, because patriarchy serves this purpose, it also constructs metanarratives to mystify its existence and legitimize it as the “solution” to the threat of chaos. When patriarchy found its new iteration in neoliberalism, a new metanarrative arose that tied neoliberalism to American civil religion. According to this metanarrative, the free market system and the heterosexual, male-headed two-parent family were divinely ordained to ensure the moral order and prevent immorality and chaos that would threaten the national status. After World War II, a new era of capitalism began in which economic competition overtook military rivalry as the main grounds of establishing national power amongst nation-states. As Ellen Meiksins Wood writes in *Empire of Capital*, “It was during this time that the purpose of military power

shifted decisively away from the relatively well defined goals of imperial expansion and imperialist rivalry to the open-ended objective of policing the world in the interests of (US) capital.” Wood contends that neoliberalism is in fact a new imperialism governed by economic imperatives, a global system in which military coercion is no longer quite so vital but in which economic powers are able to dictate conditions to the world without direct colonial rule.³

However, as Joerg Rieger argues in *No Rising Tide*, this metanarrative of the propriety of capitalism that gives it such global power actually functions as a religion in that it requires strong faith in the economic system – specifically, faith that the system creates mutually beneficial results through supply and demand that keep production and prices in balance. The economic system, rather than the government, becomes the great savior of the people, the provider of the common good. Because this is also the claim of Christianity, and because Christianity has a privileged status within Western capitalism, many Christian entities have subsumed capitalism into their theological schemas as the “Christian economic system,” while alternatives like socialism are viewed as threatening to the Protestant work ethic and Western progress (also equated with God’s plan for the world). Yet, as Rieger points out, regardless of the promises of the metanarrative, the economic gains of neoliberal capitalism are privatized amongst the owners of the means of production, while the losses are socialized. Furthermore, as a certain strand of Christianity and free market economics shape up together with patriarchy in the United States, individualism becomes tantamount to the moral and common good. This becomes the high goal, the aspiration of all these systems – to be free from communal or governmental responsibility and to be self-actualizing and self-determining. Rieger believes that this myth of individualism is one of the most important points of connection between religion and economics. In terms of

³ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Empire of Capital* (London: Verso, 2005), 128-131.

family and social theory, individualism looks like the privatization of the nuclear family, as well as the idea that each family and each individual within the family is responsible for their own success or failure, based largely on whether or not they obey the rules of the system in place. Interestingly, this system's facets – religion, family, economy, and politics – all abide by the same rules and spirit, dictated by a hierarchical structure of power, which is purported to be for the benefit of the many. However, this creates a significant problem that is eclipsed by the very logic operational in the system itself:

...[The] neglected problem of the market is that it has produced another set of power imbalances that challenges not only economic distribution but democracy itself. What keeps us from noticing this is once again blind faith without concern for what happens in real life – especially in the lives of those who do not benefit from the economic system as it currently works.⁴

The question of why single mothers are disadvantaged can be neglected so long as their existence is seen to be an anomaly; but neglect is no longer an option when the numbers of single mothers here in the United States are growing exponentially – and when more Christians are finding themselves in this situation. I echo Rieger's proposal that our goal in addressing the inequality and inequity suffered by single mothers and others in our current context should not be to reconcile or integrate these persons back into a system that has rejected them but rather to address – and perhaps even deconstruct – the system that produced the problems in the first place.⁵

While the model used by The Life of the Single Mom Ministries finds strength in the formation of communities of support for single mothers, thus providing a sort of ambivalence

⁴ Joerg Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 17.

⁵ Ibid., 26.

and counternarrative to privatization, these communities do not attempt to *change* anything in society that would alleviate the material suffering of single mothers – or even counter the social and spiritual stigma in evangelical Christianity that follows these mothers like a constant shadow.

While my critique of this one single-mother organization might seem to rather tough on a well-meaning non-profit, at least The Life of the Single Mom Ministries refuses to turn a blind eye to the existence of the single-mother demographic. Further still, this organization at least recognizes that single mothers can be Christians and that Christians sometimes find themselves raising children without a spouse. In Christian circles, single mothers are often ignored demographics, and their struggles are frequently treated as consequences of irresponsible, selfish, and immoral actions. Maggio's ministry identifies the value and potential of women raising children alone and seeks to alleviate their struggles. However, her ministry model and rhetoric leave intact both a harmful theology built on patriarchy, capitalist interest, and misogyny that alienates and shames single mothers and a social and economic system that victimizes women in general and unmarried mothers in particular. Does evangelical Christianity have the tools to confront a patriarchal social and economic system and to move theologically beyond judgment of alternative family structures? Or has evangelical Christianity's historical and contemporary provision of the tools for building the "master's house" that victimizes single mothers rendered this religious tradition an irredeemable opponent of progressive social and theological gender movements?⁶

⁶ Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 110-113.

From feminist and queer philosophy to Marxist critique of economic and social systems, thinkers and activists within the field of religious studies have recognized the potency of religion and spirituality as a conduit both for oppressive metanarratives and for counternarratives of resistance. Furthermore, they have sought to introduce new lenses for studies that decenter normative perspectives in favor of experiences and viewpoints previously marginalized. For example, Marcella Althaus-Reid challenges us to destabilize liberation theology's embrace of a particular Marxist critique and construction as ignoring gender and sexuality and to recast our Christology as one embodied in sexuality and queerness. Furthermore, she pushes for a more "indecent" theology that does not attempt to "clean up" in theological figures such as Christ and Mary the realities of quotidian life but instead embraces these indecencies as part and parcel of such figures and even of their holiness.⁷ Brazilian philosopher Paolo Freire theorized that the models and efforts for liberation championed by well-meaning figures from outside of oppressed classes are not truly helpful; instead, he argued, the oppressed must recognize their own roles in oppressive systems, as well as their own agency to develop new and effective means of asserting themselves, resisting oppression, and achieving liberation. Other strains of theology such as Minjung theology in South Korea, Black theology, liberation theology, feminist theology, mujerista theology, and womanist theology demonstrate the power of undertaking to develop theologies specifically for the liberation of and by marginalized identities. Finally, postcolonial theologies, such as those developed by Kwok Pui-lan, Joerg Rieger, Musa Dube, and Jung Mo Sung, maintain an organic relationship with liberation theology but push for a continued critical engagement with the insidious operation of Empire and power in our midst and with the diverse and active responses and resistance that the agency of those often deemed "oppressed" under

⁷ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, (New York: Routledge, 2002).

liberation theology have constructed. Additionally, postcolonial theology seeks to collapse the dualism of oppressed and oppressor by revealing the complicity of seemingly innocent or neutral entities in hegemony, as well as the disempowerment of those often viewed as beneficiaries of Empire. However, amidst the growing number of incisive inquiries into the operation of power differentials across gender, race, class, and nationality, there is a notable dearth of work being done from the perspective of unmarried mothers, a demographic that struggles in the U.S. context not only with material situations of oppression but also with social and spiritual alienation.

While common contemporary notions of “myth” often employ this term to refer to fictional tales generally passed down over time and mistaken for truth, French postmodern philosopher Jean-François Lyotard defines myth as a story that is central to a culture or people group, which “bestow legitimacy upon social institutions.”⁸ In the United States, as well as in other areas of our globe, social, political, and theological perceptions of motherhood and family constitute a myth, a crucial and principal description of “how things are meant to be” if the righteousness and rightness of a culture or people is to be preserved. However, single motherhood is often depicted as oppositional and threatening to the “proper, primordial, and preordained” order of family as nuclear and heterosexually partnered. Motherhood presents a confluence of the mother’s role as protector and the myth of woman as vulnerable, ideas that find their basis not only in the manifestation of relationships (as in the mother as protector of the child) but also in mystified and “naturalized” norms of gender and sex and in appeals to theological arguments. The single mother presents a problem to society, culture, and religion in

⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 20.

that the woman has no male complement to allow her to be both protected and protector and thus a “true woman” and good mother. Perhaps more insidious, however, is the economic benefit received from perpetuation of the nuclear family structure and, in connection, the vilification of mothering without matrimony. This denunciation of single motherhood maintains the patriarchal status quo of the neoliberal economic system, using theological rhetoric to form a sort of civil religion, of which “family” is central.⁹

In this project, I propose to examine the link between social stigma in Western evangelical Christianities surrounding “single motherhood” and the privatization attendant with late capitalism. In the case of single motherhood, the patriarchy that victimizes these women is actually furthered through evangelical Christian notions regarding morality, family, and being. A reified and patriarchal form of Christianity that emphasizes “family values” – that is, adherence to the formula of a male-headed, heterosexual, capitalist, nuclear family, characterized by distinct, complementary, and hierarchical gender roles as essential to the well-being of individuals, one’s nation, and the ecumenical Church - over “community values” has become a happy bedfellow of the market system and neocolonialism, extending its reach worldwide through globalization. This form is not only conducive to capitalism’s privatization of wealth, production, and ownership of economic power but also disempowering to unmarried mothers.

Theoretical Discussions on Metanarrative

⁹ Heidi J. Hartmann captures the gendered base of capitalism and its attendant oppressions in her definition of patriarchy: “...a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women.”

Heidi J. Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union,” in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, 3rd edition, ed. Wendy K. Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski, (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2005), 300f.

In 1979, French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard published his popular treatise on postmodernism, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. According to Lyotard, metanarratives are stories that seek to explain the way things are and ought to be, constructed in such a way that they legitimize certain systems and epistemologies, and are largely characterized in our modern society by myths concerning progress towards morality, enlightenment, and emancipation.¹⁰ Postmodernism's primary characteristic, writes Lyotard, is skepticism of these metanarratives. Lyotard maintains that beginning in the Industrial Revolution and increasingly in the present era, knowledge has become a commodity and force for production, a phenomenon he terms the "mercantilization of knowledge."¹¹ Rather than being valued for its "truth," knowledge becomes valuable for its "productivity," function, or use. Significantly, though, the structures and canons against which knowledge is tested for its functionality are products of a power center; that is, these canons are selected by those in power because the "truths" they produce reflect the status quo which supports the power center's interests. For example, Lyotard cites modernism's privileging of science and empiricism to the detriment of other forms of knowledge, such as emotion, feeling, and experience. Therefore, the economic system has been built upon those certain scientific forms of knowledge, so that alternative knowledges do not "function" in this system and are therefore literally worthless. As Lyotard notes, many important discoveries' "productivity" in a particular system are not immediately discernible because these discoveries are so novel and "radical" that they defy and deviate from the conventional system and knowledge.¹² What is masked in such a society is that the dominant system of knowledge

¹⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹² *Ibid.*

and economy is just one of several metanarratives that control what qualifies as “truth,” but metanarratives eclipse the existence of these alternatives. The dominant metanarrative is perceived by those in power to be the most productive or efficient.

Lyotard does not see reason as an immutable, universal truth. Instead, “reason” is that which seems rational within the given metanarrative system, and because this form of reason supports the metanarrative structure and mechanism, it is often seen to be the only valid form, thus excluding alternative variations and limiting the scope and possibility of ideas. To counter this limitation, Lyotard argues for “paralogy,” which he defines as a movement against or outside of the established method of legitimation or the societal norms, also termed “counternarrative”.¹³ By always searching for and exploring the potential instabilities in metanarratives or knowledges, humans might discover a plethora of vital and valid counternarratives.

Lyotard certainly recognized the political and economic implications of commodifying knowledge and excluding alternative ways of knowing that may demonstrate the constructed nature of the extant social, economic, and epistemological systems. However, his chief concern was the limitation of the possibilities for new ideas and discoveries and the recourse this would have for epistemology and the academy; he did not delve into the imbricated metanarratives that result in particular and material oppression of not just ideas but also actual people groups. Taking Lyotard’s critique further, I contend that the employment of “productivity” (which I define here as that which leads to relatively smooth participation in and quantifiable success through conformity to society, economy, and religious systems) within the existing epistemological, cultural, and social systems as a canon for the truth or correctness of any given logic, paradigm, or practice perpetuates the hegemony of patriarchy and legitimizes mystified

¹³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 61, 65.

explanations for patriarchy, neocolonialism, and social and economic systems that contribute to a multiplicity of interlaced oppressions. How then might we expose the constructed nature of a regime that either excludes and silences counternarratives or depicts them as “the abject” – sinful, deviant, dangerous, threatening – and non-productive?¹⁴

Postcolonial Theory: Theologies from the Margins

In *The Location of Culture*, postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha discusses the agency of the oppressed as something that can never be completely co-opted by those in power and as that which might be strategically deployed to deconstruct hegemonic structures and metanarratives. To Bhabha, the “colonized” (which might be loosely applied to all those on the margins of society and power) are walking, breathing embodiments of counternarrative. Even in their efforts to conform to the norms prescribed to them, they present a problematic counternarrative. According to Bhabha, the oppressed perform mimicry of those in power, of the expectations held by those in power of the subaltern, and of the systems and resources of those in power. However, this mimicry is never a complete embodiment of that which is mimicked; instead, it is a mimicry performed with *différance* – a subtle difference that makes all the difference, to paraphrase French philosopher Jacques Derrida.¹⁵ This difference – deviance,

¹⁴ Judith Butler discusses the notion of “the abject” at length in her writings, specifically in *Bodies that Matter*. The abject is that which bears some commonality to those who position themselves – or are positioned within “the norm” (or at the power center) but which seems to transgress ostensibly established norms or morals in a way that produces in the beholder a distinction between self and Other. When we believe that the codes and identities which are accepted as normal, moral, and worthy of inclusion in the “power center” (as those benefiting from privilege and sharing in power in a society) are reified, stable, and natural, the abject is produced.

Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, (New York: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁵ In the essay “Différance,” Derrida proposes the idea that significations of any person, idea, event, text, etc., are always beyond the grasp of our lexical resources and thus our full perception and are only formed through appearances of difference from other persons, ideas, events, texts, etc., thus creating binary oppositions. When applied to postcolonial theory, *différance* refers to the inability of any label or description to properly capture the totality of any individual or group of people and to the creation of inaccurate and oppressive dualisms through

really – from the metanarratives that those in power create regarding the subaltern reveals the instability and inaccuracy of these narratives. In fact, *différance* gestures at the production of hybridity in the interstitial space occupied by the mimicking subaltern. These ideas are instrumental to postcolonial theory. Theologian R.J. Sugirtharajah describes postcolonial theory as “a textual and praxiological practice initially undertaken by people who were once part of the British, European, and American Empires, but now have some sort of territorial freedom while continuing to live the burdens from the past and enduring newer forms of economic and cultural neo-colonialism.”¹⁶

Many theologians have taken up postcolonial critique in their work, with some focusing on recognizing and elevating the voices of the colonized in the Two-Thirds World as powerful agents of deconstruction of Empire, while others visualize Empire as being a logic of power, the beneficiaries of which are more diffuse than under actual nation-state colonialism. Daniel F. Pilario, Dean and Professor at St. Vincent’s School of Theology in Manila, proposes that there are two main ways that Christian theologians have set about employing postcolonial theory: nativist hermeneutics and liberationist hermeneutics. In the first, the task is to affirm the marginalized, subaltern culture over and against Eurocentrism, westernization, or internationalism of theologies.¹⁷ The second approach, liberationist hermeneutics, seeks to reveal

efforts to categorize and essentialize persons. *Différance* indicates a surplus signification that cannot be co-opted, commodified, or captured by the power center doing the labeling and assigning of values, roles, and identities.

Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 1-28.

¹⁶ R.J. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial, and Postcolonial Encounters*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 247.

¹⁷ Daniel F. Pilario, “Mapping Postcolonial Theory: Appropriations into Contemporary Theology,” in *Asian Christian Review* vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 71.

the oppressiveness of dominant systems, structures, and metanarratives, advocates for grassroots, contextual readings of scriptural texts and theologies that allow for the subaltern's identification with empowering figures, and leads identity-specific readings, such as those offered in *mujerista* theologies, womanist theologies, queer theologies, and more.

In this latter approach, postcolonial theory, with its focus on hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence, has introduced a new line of inquiry that seeks to expose, in Daniel F. Pilario's words, the "always present underside" of colonization in our midst.¹⁸ Theologians such as Joerg Rieger, Catherine Keller, and Kathryn Tanner view Empire as transcending nation-states and national politics in its new iteration, and, as such, it narrows its beneficiaries and broadens the class of disempowered persons beyond those traditionally viewed as colonized. While still recognizing that our postcolonial world marginalizes certain people groups, especially those once colonized politically in the Two-Thirds World, more severely and overtly than others, the perspective of these theologians is that postcolonial theory gives us tools to uncover the problematic notions and operation of power that disempower the vast majority of global citizens from true control and self-actualization in this more diffuse system of Empire that infects our economies, politics, cultures, and societies. By this logic, we can both recognize that our benefitting from the systems in place and our proximity to the power center is located on a spectrum, in which we gain greater benefits the more we replicate the "rules" and norms of the power center – through gender performance, sexual orientation, nationality and political leanings, performance in and embrace of neoliberal capitalism, class status, race and ethnicity, ability, religious beliefs, and more. The more we deviate from the power center's norms and

¹⁸Daniel F. Pilario, "Mapping Postcolonial Theory: Appropriations into Contemporary Theology," 48-78.

rules, the fewer benefits and less access to power we have.¹⁹ At the same time, though, this recognition of a mutual “oppressor” – an awareness raised when we realize that most of us are located outside of the power center and do not truly hold power under Empire – offers us grounds to unite in what Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan call “deep solidarity” with the subaltern and those more obviously disempowered and marginalized.²⁰ According to Rieger and Kwok, this deep solidarity constructs a view of God’s power as antithetical and deconstructive of Empire’s top-down power in that, for people of faith who embrace deep solidarity, God’s power is conceived as being manifested in “with-ness” that goes beyond simple advocacy for the poor and marginalized and is instead, through the incarnation of Christ, a true identification with the poor and marginalized. In this theology, God is not just rooting for the underdogs but is involved in the struggle for liberation as one who is oppressed by top-down power. Thus, the task of postcolonial theologians is to deconstruct oppressive power, along with the ways that Christianity has been co-opted by harmful metanarratives and practices, offer alternative readings and theologies that empower the subaltern (referred to in this work as counternarratives), and mobilize resistance and liberating action through the communication of alternative practices, concepts, and theologies.

This liberationist approach is one that may prove helpful to Christian single mothers, though the nativist approach, utilized in this project in a case study on unmarried mothers in South Africa, may also provide grounds for the construction of liberating alternatives to harmful messages, practices, and systems in our globalized Empire. What has not been done yet on any

¹⁹ It may be helpful at this point to offer a definition of both power and agency. By power, I mean the ability to both assert and carry out one’s will. Agency is the ability to assert one’s will, though it may not always be carried out as one wills, desires, or imagines. Not every person at all times and in all situations has power, but everyone at all times and in all situations has agency.

²⁰ Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan, *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

great scale is to recognize single mothers as a subaltern, as a group of persons systematically alienated and disenfranchised from the power center and its benefits. Postcolonial theory and theology allow for the expanded notion of Empire and oppression that may grant an awareness of marginalized classes within the Global North and may provide grounds for deep solidarity across borders between unmarried mothers worldwide, a unity built on their shared experiences of disempowerment and struggle as victims of oppressive patriarchal metanarratives, as well as shared empowerment through identification with Christ, with God's favor, or with a better ethics, found in the theologies and practices they produce.

The Single Mother as Hybrid

As hybrid, the subaltern produces their identity through the intersections and interactions of the narratives imposed upon them and the ineffable "Real" that they might embody and experience but that escapes definitions, descriptions, and co-optations.²¹ In *Beyond the Spirit of Empire*, authors Néstor Míguez, Jung Mo Sung, and Joerg Rieger apply the Lacanian distinction between "reality" and "the Real" to demonstrate the difference between the existence of an insidiously hegemonic metanarrative that excludes alternatives (reality) and what actually *is* but that escapes easy recognition ("the Real"). "The Real" is that which can debunk the hegemony of the metanarrative by operating as counternarratives. Hybridity entails being both "the norm" and "the abject". According to Bhabha, hybridity is produced when dominant power attempts to impose a metanarrative of being and propriety upon colonized, marginalized, or subaltern subjects. From the perspective of power, this is understood as an attempt to both eliminate "otherness" by assimilating the subaltern and as an effort to create amongst the subaltern what

²¹ Néstor Míguez, Jung Mo Sung, and Joerg Rieger, *Beyond the Spirit of Empire: Theology and Politics in a New Key*, (London: SCM Press, 2009).

Franz Fanon called people with “black skin/white masks” – that is, a class of the colonized or subaltern who would act as interpreters between the power center and the Other and as agents of mimicry and assimilation for the subaltern.²² However, this mimicry is never an exact duplication of the power center and often does more to expose the differences between the power center and the Other. Yet, in this deviation, essentialist discourses about the Other and the power center are irrupted, and the authority of the metanarratives and their essentialism and totality are exposed as fraudulent.²³

In the United States, single mothers have been recognized by and included into dominant discourses, in both overtly negative ways – such as when female heads of household are blamed for juvenile delinquency and welfare fraud – and in seemingly sympathetic ways by evangelical theologies – such as the creation of single-parent ministries to aid in the spiritual restoration of single mothers. My contention is that neither metanarrative – that the single mother is a threat to society, nor that the single mother is a victim of Satan’s evil ways and thus needs redemption – is totally embodied by single mothers. According to this particular metanarrative concerning proper family structures, single mothers are thought to endanger the holiness, morality, and economic and political power of the United States. Since the Victorian era, the women were thought to endow the home with morality and virtue in contrast to the immorality thought to accompany the cutthroat ambition of the public sphere. Thus, men, who were assumed to be better suited for the public sphere, and women, whose jobs were to correct the influence of the public arena on their families, were seen to need one another. Without this complementarity, society was believed to be at risk of utter moral decline and depravity. Obedience to this mystified notion of gender

²² Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Richard Philcox, (New York: Grove Press, 2008).

²³ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

roles and responsibilities took on nationalistic and religious overtones and economic undertones in the 1950s following World War II when the metanarrative concerning family structures emphasized American exceptionalism and divine blessing and urged the necessity of heterosexual marriage and the embracing of gendered roles for the retention of God's (economic and militaristic power) blessings upon an essentially moral nation. According to this metanarrative, single mothers are a risk to the morality of the United States and thus the continued providence of the Judeo-Christian God, whose blessings are assumed to come in the form of high GDP, international power, and sovereignty.

However, unmarried mothers who are associated with or influenced by Western evangelical forms of Christianity possess within themselves a dissonance for which there is not yet an official public language or rhetoric. Even amongst those single mothers who avow themselves as sinners or who embrace evangelical theologies of personal sin and redemption and who view their struggles as spiritual tests rather than systemic injustices, their mimicry of metanarratives is different enough to produce a surplus signification – an excess of meaning that neither their churches nor they might intend. For example, when asked if they believed their churches were supportive of single mothers, many women who participated in interviews for this project answered that they felt their churches to be supportive because they offered them, as single mothers, a path to redemption and did not view them as wholly lost, messages which imply that there is something shameful about single motherhood. However, in their single-parent ministries, the ways that these women sought to empower one another was by both providing materially in ways that their larger churches did not – stocking one another's kitchens with food, providing childcare, or covering bills – and telling one another that they need not be ashamed that they are single mothers. Thus, in this attempt to incorporate single mothers into the

metanarrative of moral propriety in the Christian Church, there is not necessarily open disagreement with the metanarrative or efforts and terms of inclusion into the existing theologies of the Church, but there is an inexact replication or mimicry of this metanarrative that exposes a disconnect, a dissonance, and a “Third Space”, to use Bhabha’s term, in which new counternarratives can be developed.²⁴

In essence, these women may interpret their Christian faith and morality to be intact, in contrast to what the dominant metanarrative and evangelical Christianity might say. Additionally, single mothers may recognize themselves to be good parents, raising good children, despite the warnings of the metanarrative about the deficiency of spouseless parents. In regards to the economic and social systems, such women may in fact possess the skills, education, or ambition to succeed in these realms, only to face unnavigable hurdles due to their single parenthood. In this last case, unmarried mothers must choose to interpret these struggles either as deserved sanctions for their deviance and sin or as structural, systemic problems that victimize them undeservedly.

“Fixing” Single Motherhood: Methods and Approaches

Countering this metanarrative, alternative narratives are arising that, while providing an opposing view of unmarried mothers to that of the dominant metanarrative, may not effectively deconstruct the metanarrative itself. To the rescue of single mothers come alternative narratives produced by portions of the liberal and feminist camps who insist that single motherhood can be a form of female empowerment and an exercise of personal agency. These narratives cite examples of high-powered, career-type women who elect to become single mothers, therefore proving the fallaciousness of patriarchy’s message that women need husbands (or at least

²⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 53-56.

committed male partners) in order to succeed and raise well-adjusted children. In the article “Choosing Single Motherhood,” professor of Comparative Human Development at the University of Chicago Micele Keels suggests that a ticking biological clock in a world with fewer marital options influences many women nowadays to make a “rational choice” to bear children outside of marriage.²⁵ But Rosanna Hertz’ study American unmarried mothers who are older, financially secure, and college-educated and who have elected to have children calls out a dissonance between the feminist rhetoric of empowerment and self-determination and the self-consciousness of their deviance from the traditional nuclear family. In particular, when considering becoming mothers without a spouse or romantic partner, these women appear sensitive to the feedback they receive from their families, friends, and social institutions such as churches – a dynamic bordering on asking permission and rarely seen amongst married couples.²⁶ Thus, the anxiety these “liberated women” experience concerning their navigation of social systems is an indication of the power of the metanarrative of the propriety of the nuclear family.

What is more, according to the world’s gaze, childless single women who achieve economic success pose less of a threat to the patriarchal system, for they still bear the possibility of finding a mate and either sharing their finances with their spouse or else retreating from the public sphere to devote themselves to domestic and maternal duties. Yet with their choices to become single mothers, these more privileged women still endure significant struggles navigating a world built for two heterosexual parents and potentially face the judgment of a patriarchal social world. How much more, then, might a woman who finds herself unexpectedly

²⁵ Micele Keels, “Choosing Single Motherhood,” in *Contexts* (Sage Publications, 2014): 70-72.

²⁶ Rosanna Hertz, *Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice: How Women Are Choosing Parenthood without Marriage and Creating the New American Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

pregnant face insurmountable odds as a woman forced into the public sphere for the survival of her family and with little immanent possibility of being “rescued” by a husband with whom she would then share responsibilities, finances – and power?

From the shared anxieties common to those who choose single motherhood and those who are single mothers by chance, we might surmise that a fundamental ideology of the metanarrative remains undisturbed by women who seek to assert their empowerment by parenting without a male partner. Indeed, the metanarrative is not necessarily fueled solely or even primarily by the outmoded notion that women need men in order to thrive. Instead, the premium placed on two-parent, heterosexual nuclear families is about retaining power amongst those who have traditionally held the most authority and control in a society. Patriarchal societies can support a modicum of women who participate in the public sphere and appear to share in privilege often reserved for men – for example, in politics, in clergy, and in corporate leadership. However, these women must not threaten to deconstruct, challenge, or redistribute the power center’s authority or resources. Instead, they must substantiate through their stances, practices, and personal narratives the values and teachings of patriarchy.²⁷

Patriarchal societies might even tolerate the presence of a few single mothers – provided their personal successes corroborate the myths central to the strength of the metanarrative. This is exactly why Jennifer Maggio’s story and her ministry are accepted and celebrated publicly and by evangelical Christian churches. Currently, the metanarrative in operation and in which many iterations of evangelical Christianity are invested is that hard work and strict adherence to the moral code established centuries ago by white males in the Western Christian Church results in economic stability, read as God’s blessing for these expressions of the Protestant work ethic.

²⁷ Allan G. Johnson, “Patriarchy,” in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, 8th edition, ed. Paula S. Rothenberg, (New York: Worth Publishers, 2010), 153-161.

According to this belief, single mothers who have born children out of marriage have not abided by this code and are therefore not entitled to success or even stability. However, these women are not beyond hope but can be redeemed through a number of counteractions that indicate their repentance and conversion to a new “moral” way of life commensurate with the established moral codes. Acceptable expressions of repentance and conversion include giving one’s child up for adoption, getting married, or forswearing any sexual expression for the rest of one’s life.

Furthermore, the penitent woman is expected to openly name her impregnation as a sin and be able to communicate a personal narrative of linear progression from moral and spiritual darkness (manifested in the exercise of sexuality prior to marriage) to joy and enlightenment through the renunciation of sex before marriage as an act against God. This path to redemption leaves unchallenged the castigation of single motherhood as an outward sign of past or present sinfulness, thus justifying the Christian Church’s withholding of advocacy and support for unmarried mothers. Economic and logistical struggles such as finding childcare for a night shift, paying rent, attending parent-teacher meetings during the workday, or finding work with paid sick leave may be accepted as repercussions of sinful, irresponsible acts, not as unjust artifacts of a patriarchal era for which there are viable alternatives.

Single motherhood in the United States is treated like an unsightly scar, an imperfection that discredits the gleaming presentation of the metanarrative of the United States as a paragon of virtue. Many Christians in the United States have embraced the language of family values, by which they equate moral excellence with the nuclear family. However, the advocacy of the traditional nuclear family, comprised of mother, father, and children, capitalizes on the paranoia fostered by the “national security complex” of our day.²⁸ The nuclear family becomes the

²⁸ In *Earth Into Property*, Anthony J. Hall describes the primary mentality that drives the globalization of North American interests, characterized as the “military-industrial complex”, as a “national security state.” Hall

primary, if not sole, arbiter of morality and truth and serves as protector and insulator of children from contamination by the evils of the world. Any deviation from this structure disrupts the only formula that can produce good Christian citizens. Yet this also implies that the nuclear family structure becomes a form of biopower that, subsumed into the economic system, is primarily a producer – of “good Christian citizenship” and of desire.²⁹ Biopower, a term coined by French philosopher Michel Foucault, refers to the authority taken on by political entities (including nation-states) to regulate and “normalize” how people live their lives, often by creating norms and policing those norms. These norms also change according to who holds power and are created in the image of the power center.³⁰ By sacralizing the nuclear family structure and linking it with the idea of blessedness (particularly of security and material prosperity), this metanarrative produces in our culture a desire to imitate this structure and to denigrate alternative images of family. Significantly, though, the desire created presents specific roles for male and female that submit the female to the male “head” of the family.

Single mothers within Christianity embody a potent form of hybridity that has the potential to irrupt the metanarrative of the holiness of the male-headed nuclear family, thus exposing the patriarchy and oppression of those on the margins of power that this metanarrative supports. Because the rhetorical and moral formation of this metanarrative is grounded in

believes that with the inception of U.S. involvement in World War I in 1917, and gaining momentum with the Cold War and “Red Scare”, the U.S. has perpetuated their globalization efforts and conquests by employing the language of demonization of anything that differs from the norms established by American elites and the perpetuation of the metanarrative of the goodness of the U.S. that necessitates protection from mentalities, practices, and persons that “threaten the sanctity, purity, and status” of the U.S.

Anthony J. Hall, *Earth Into Property: Colonization, Decolonization, and Capitalism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010), 267.

²⁹ Jana Sawicki, “Disciplining Mothers: Feminism and the New Reproductive Technologies,” in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, eds. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 190.

³⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1978).

evangelical Christian language and ideas, the Christian single mother might possibly, with the right tools in hand, reinterpret Christianity and re-deploy their faith in an alternative way that proves liberating and empowering to them while exposing injustice built into our current economic, political, social, and religious systems. The Christian single mother is a paradox of holiness and ostensible, salient deviance, but to be both unapologetically is not a possibility dominant Western forms of evangelical Christianity can accommodate. However, it is a possibility which, by deploying certain obscured or marginalized interpretations and perspectives, evangelical Christianity can allow. Thus, the Christian single mother is a powerful paradox.

Deconstructing the Metanarrative

Because there has currently been so little work either linking the struggles of single mothers with patriarchal power and injustices in late capitalism and with messages employed by Western forms of evangelical Christianity, unmarried mothers, their allies, and feminists might do well to look outside of the Global North for alternative ways of participating in economies and in Christianity in ways that are empowering to women – and especially to unmarried mothers. A powerful means of deconstructing the metanarrative of the patriarchal nuclear family and revealing its collusion with an oppressive form of late capitalism might be to consider the theologies, counternarratives, and alternative practices developed by unmarried mothers in contexts where the constructed nature of this metanarrative is perceivable.

In this project, interviews and examples from both the United States and South Africa will be analyzed to provide both a sense of the impact of patriarchal and Empire-supporting metanarratives on single mothers, as well as potential counternarratives, theologies, and practices

that might deconstruct the authority of the metanarrative and offer grounds for both empowerment of single mothers and resistance to oppression. South Africa offers an important context for a case study for three reasons. First, South Africa has the unique distinction of being a capitalist nation tied to vestiges of colonialism and white racism, while boasting rural areas still populated by visible indigenous groups who engage in alternative economic practices without being subsumed into the standard features of neoliberal culture – namely, privatization, market deregulation, and consumerism. Catherine Odora Hoppers, Professor of Development Education at the University of South Africa, stated in a speech delivered at a 2008 UNESCO conference that “modernization proceeds in South Africa, but without necessarily following Western values or sequences, but rather with a re-strengthening of core values from different traditions of knowing and living.”³¹ Evidencing this statement, the Rural Women’s Movement (RWM), a dynamic anti-patriarchal indigenous group, strives to empower women to work together in business in order to leave the employment of white-owned farms and companies. Considerable South African contingencies find non-authoritative many Western social arrangements and theologies, such as those pertaining to nuclear family structures, and the nation has a long tradition of socialist critique. Thus, South Africa is the site of great ambivalence in that it is both a “westernized” participant in global capitalism and in patriarchal metanarratives introduced by colonialism and simultaneously a country in which significant contingencies retain their indigenous affiliations.

Secondly, the current dynamics in the movement of Christianity around the world indicate that growth is stagnating in the Global North but spreading exponentially in the Two-

³¹ Hoppers, Catherine Odora, “Life Long Learning in Africa: Lessons, Experiences and Opportunities from Cultural and Cognitive Justice,” Speech, 21st Talks on “Lifelong Learning for All: How to Get There” from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, October 19, 2008.

Thirds World. In light of this shift, it is important for the United States to take note of the theologies hailing from the same religion, which are produced in the Two-Thirds World and address issues common to all contexts. Many of these theologies are adaptations of dominant Christianities found in the Global North, such as the prosperity gospel, but even these take on a hybridity and difference that offers potent grounds for nativist and even liberationist hermeneutics. Furthermore, many of the forms of Christianity springing up in the Two-Thirds World are erupting from situations of oppression and are formed as a means of resistance to domination, as we will see in our discussion of evangelicalism and Black South African theologies in South Africa. These theologies possess an ambivalence in themselves and risk being co-opted by power, being domesticated and losing their political edge, or romanticizing indigeneity and thus unreflectively supporting other forms of patriarchy and oppression latent in traditional cultures. However, any theology of liberation, from any religious background, survives in tension with these factors and thus must always be in process and development to adapt to new contextual oppressions and liberation needs.

Finally, South Africa provides my project with a context in which female-headed households are norms in religious communities rather than necessarily being exceptions or signs of immorality. I will analyze the experiences of single mothers in South Africa, specifically in the KwaZulu-Natal province where the percentage of female-headed households hovers consistently around 45%.³² According to the “Social Profile of Vulnerable Groups in South Africa,” “female-headed households are much less likely to be single or nuclear and more likely to be some variation of extended than male headed households.”³³ This indicates that African

³² “Social Profile of Vulnerable Groups in South Africa: 2002-2010,” Stats SA, accessed September 28, 2014, <https://www.statssa.gov.za/Publications/Report-03-19-00/Report-03-19-002002.pdf>

³³ *Ibid.*, 65.

women might not adhere to the nuclear or single forms of family that predominate in American culture but instead ascribe more to community-based social organization. Harkening back to our earlier discussion of Rieger and Kwok's work, this social organization lends itself to deep solidarity and the mutual sense of responsibility for one another and the work of resistance that comes with it. Could communitarianism thus provide an alternative framework that single mothers within Christianity might utilize to produce a counternarrative that demystifies an oppressive patriarchal myth?

Summary of Chapters

In this project, I propose to explore counternarratives embodied, performed, and articulated by those within the Christian tradition that might serve as fodder not merely for demystifying and demythologizing the nuclear family structure as the only "Christian" kinship organization but also for mobilizing expressions of this religion to combat the entire system of patriarchy as it manifests in economics, globalization, religion, and society. The second chapter will discuss the contemporary employment of the metanarrative of the nuclear family as the Christian and social ideal, primarily as it has functioned in the United States. In my project's third chapter, I will examine historical development of the nuclear family and how it has become intertwined with a particular and dominant form of evangelicalism and attendant politics. In the fourth chapter, I will relate the experiences of American single mothers who participated in interviews for this project and will explore the contemporary connection between the economic objectives of late capitalism, patriarchy, and the nuclear family structure in the United States, analyzing the constructed nature of the conflation of these features of society and Christianity. Then, in the fifth chapter, I will report and analyze the findings of my fieldwork amongst

Christian single mothers in the Rural Women's Movement of South Africa to glean potential counternarratives that might aid women's resistance to the forms of oppression in question in this project. Finally, in my concluding chapter, I will offer a synthesis of the narratives and perspectives on single motherhood, social organization, and Christianity presented by interview participants and how this both reflects and resists prominent Western metanarratives concerning prosperity, gender propriety, the nuclear family, and morality, positing potential counternarratives through the incipient and embodied theologies of single mothers.

While I will be utilizing scholarship from a variety of fields, I will also conduct my own study of people and dynamics in the United States and KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Domestically, I will focus upon evangelical Christian groups by evaluating messages from and dialoguing with congregations, laypersons, and leaders of these groups. Additionally, I will be interviewing single mothers affiliated with evangelical Christian churches in the United States about their perception of their standing in the church and society. In South Africa, my sources of information include scholars at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the Ujamaa Center, both evangelical and progressive laypersons and pastors from several indigenous and international denominations, and activists involved with gender rights and the Rural Women's Movement. I will glean helpful information through observing and participating in workshops on gender justice, attending religious events, and engaging in dialogues with ministry leaders, laypersons, scholars, and activists regarding their ideas concerning motherhood, morality, and economics.

As a scholar, I am inserted into the narratives of the women I study and am aware of the labels, histories, and power I carry with me as I seek to represent their concerns. Guided by ethnographers such as Jean and John Comaroff, Karen McCarthy-Brown, James Ferguson, Ronald Grimes, and James Clifford, I am mindful of the power differentials and politics of

representation at play in my task of observing, interpreting, and reporting. In this work, I will be employing Constructivist Grounded Theory. Three primary concerns of Constructivist Grounded Theory are 1) an “interpretive understanding of subjects’ meanings,” thus allowing for multiplicities and pluralities of experience by permitting the interview subjects to tell their stories, 2) the “co-construction of data,” by which both the interviewer and the subject recognize the roles that they mutually play in interpreting and constructing useful data, and 3) the assumption of relativism of knowledge due to its partial and provisional language, as well as to the multiple social realities experienced by the interview subjects and the interviewer.³⁴ Constructivist Grounded Theory best fits my fieldwork methodology in the United States because my goal is to tell these women’s stories and experiences of parenting as a single mother. Thus, their stories lend credence to my predetermined thesis that the pressures and struggles of single motherhood are exacerbated by the collusion between some forms of evangelical Christianity and certain embodiments of late capitalism and the insidious operation of patriarchy in Western society.

I intend to employ Constructivist Grounded Theory as a praxis-based approach – that is, predicated upon the notion that theory and practice are bound to one another and rooted in dialogue and the human experience as the starting and ending points of theory. By basing my methodology upon dialogue, I hope to contribute to my subjects’ retention and enhancement of their own power. However, dialogue is not an end in itself but is bound to praxis and critical reflection. My first step has been to engage in and with the community whom I seek to represent

³⁴ Jenna P. Breckenridge, et al. “Choosing a Methodological Path: Reflections on the Constructivist Turn,” in *Grounded Theory Review*, Issue 1, Vol. 11, (June 1, 2012) , <http://groundedtheoryreview.com/2012/06/01/choosing-a-methodological-path-reflections-on-the-constructivist-turn/> (accessed August 29, 2014).

– namely, that of unmarried mothers, and I intend the observations and conclusions I draw from this study to contribute to social, political, and economic discourse and contexts.

Because this methodology is intentionally sensitive to counternarratives, mimicry, and ambivalence as keys to dialogue and deconstruction, my work will be guided on the theoretical level by feminist socialist scholars such as Heidi J. Hartmann and postcolonial scholars like Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Kwok Pui-lan, James Cochrane, and James Scott. These thinkers have contributed significantly to the deconstruction of hegemonic metanarratives by bringing to light the extant pluralities and counternarratives embodied by those outside the power center. The reflexive-dialogic praxis methodology necessitates that I admit to and consistently communicate my recognition of the partial and provisional nature of all knowledge and language. Therefore, I will strive to resist the reification of my ideas, in recognition that counternarratives can become metanarratives when co-opted by power centers. These alternative ideas must always be subject to deconstruction and open to the possibility and hope of a surplus that gives rise to new alternatives and counternarratives.

CHAPTER 2: THE SHAPE OF THE METANARRATIVE

In the 2012 book by the late progressive evangelical Rachel Held Evans, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, Evans documents her year-long social experiment in which she intends to practice “biblical womanhood.” According to Evans, “biblical womanhood” is the notion that the Christian Scriptures present clear, even literal instructions on what is expected of Christian women, the basic understanding being that these instructions are God-ordained. One of the primary aspects of “biblical womanhood” is marriage and childbearing, in that chronological order, which are inseparable from wifely submission to a husband’s authority. However, Evans’ research question that fuels her attempts to obey a different aspect of “biblical womanhood” each month is crucial: “Could an ancient collection of sacred texts, spanning multiple genres and assembled over thousands of years in cultures very different from our own,” she writes, “really offer a single cohesive formula for how to be a woman? And do all the women of Scripture fit into this same mold? Must I?”³⁵

Must we, indeed. This is the fundamental question that we must ask as we examine the preference and privilege granted to heterosexual, two-parent families, even as they make efforts to adopt egalitarianism. It is a question too often overlooked by Christian communities and individuals, especially as it pertains to the family. We have begun to question patriarchy in society and even in the home, but we continue to unreflectively accept that the nuclear family is

³⁵ Rachel Held Evans, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012), xx.

the foundational unit of our society, our moralities, our churches, and our nations. When news of poverty, crime, violence, and various other injustices and immoralities arise, our media and our queries often look at the perpetrators' or victims' family structures for answers as to root causes, the assumption being that problems with the family structure itself – and not necessarily family functioning or even pressures felt by the family due to environmental and systemic problems – fuel our societies' evils. For example, the popular blog BOSS Sports (Brothers on Sports) published an article in May, 2014, on former Baltimore Ravens football player Ray Rice who was caught on video punching his then-fiance. The article, “4 Ways I Knew Ray Rice Was Raised by a Single Mother,” lists Rice’s “low locus of control,” “effeminate response to conflict,” “zero accountability,” and commitment to marrying the woman he hit, even after the incident, as evidence that the athlete grew up in a female-headed household.³⁶ This search for causes of societal sins in the family structure – thus leading not only to the elevation of one family structure as the ideal but also to the vilification of alternative family structures – is certainly fraught with religious, moral, and even nationalistic overtones. But is the ideal of the heterosexual two-parent family structure, especially with a male head of household, a natural, God-ordained axiom for Christians?

Evans reflects upon the often-singular messages evangelical Christians receive about appropriate family structures and roles for women, for whom alternatives and options are often not presented:

Growing up in the Church, I must have heard a thousand times that my highest calling as a woman was to bear and bring up children. While men could honor God in varying capacities through work, family, and ministry, a woman’s spiritual aptitude was measured primarily by her ability to procreate. Even as a child I noticed that the church deaconesses hosted dozens of wedding and baby showers each year, but never a housewarming party

³⁶ Lieutenant General, “4 Ways I Knew Ray Rice Was Raised by a Single Mother,” BOSS Sports, May 24, 2014, <http://www.brothersonsports.com/4-ways-i-knew-ray-rice-was-raised-by-a-single-mother/>.

for a single woman or a celebration dinner for a woman who passed the bar or graduated from medical school. Subtly, the belief that I was incomplete without a husband and children crept into my subconscious.³⁷

This concept of the propriety of matrimony and childbearing for women is indeed a fundamental part of the Christian education in morality and theology administered in many evangelical contexts. In 1987, evangelical pastor John Piper and theologian Wayne Grudem began the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood to “set forth the teachings of the Bible about the complementary differences between men and women [...] because these teachings are essential for obedience to Scripture and for the health of the family and the church.” Both influential figures in Christian circles, Piper and Grudem formed this council as a reaction to feminist theology, which they believed had grown out of a secularization attendant with the post-Baby Boom era of the 1960s and escalating in the 1980s. According to the Council, evangelical Christians were dabbling with the dangerous idea that feminism and Christianity not only could coexist but also were mutually supportive of one another. The Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood includes on its website several points that they argue are “at stake” when evangelicals embrace feminist theology; among these are “the authority of the Scriptures,” “the health of the home,” “the health of the church,” worship and Bible translations (which the Council holds will be compromised if feminine language for God and inclusive language are adopted), and the “[advancing] of the gospel.”³⁸ As Evans described in her personal reflection

³⁷ Rachel Held Evans, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, 178.

³⁸ Interestingly, the website for the CBMW does not define feminism or this evangelical feminist theology of which they speak. However, we may infer from the reactive statements regarding the risks posed by such theology that the Council would possibly identify feminist theology as that which proposes the equality of men and women, the questionability of traditional, complementary, and biologically determined gender roles, the deconstruction of patriarchy, the de-gendering of God, and the adoption of inclusive language and increased usage of feminine imagery in worship, sacred texts, and speech about the Divine.

The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, <http://cbmw.org/about/mission-vision/>, (accessed Jan. 5, 2016).

upon the messages she received regarding her role as a woman and as the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood attests, in many evangelical Christian communities in the United States a monolithic image of the Christian ideal of family structures and of women's roles in these families is presented and lauded. Moreover, a great deal of import is placed on adherence to these formulas of relationships and roles – including but not limited to personal holiness, the health of one's children and relationships, the health, efficacy, and power of the Christian Church and the purity of its message, the authenticity and strength of one's relationship to and connection with the Divine, and even the wellbeing of the nation. Alternatives are dangerous.

What Evans and the CBMW relate are the operation of a metanarrative, a grand, master narrative that proposes to explain the purposes for which women are created and the roles women ought to play in order to honor the Divine and thus secure blessings for themselves, their families, their communities, and their countries. However, while Evans focuses in the aforementioned passage on the childbearing piece, there is an underlying expectation that this childbearing will occur in the context of marriage. In 2011, *Relevant* magazine reported that 30% of unmarried evangelical Christian women between the ages of 18 and 29 had experienced a pregnancy, a figure that is actually 1% higher than among women who do not identify as evangelical.)³⁹ The fact that single mothers are bearing and raising children, apparently a fundamental aspect of the metanarrative of Christian women's purpose, actually becomes scandalous, shameful, and dangerous when taken on without a male spouse.

But, as Evans inspires us to ask, are there alternatives available to evangelical Christians that can prove supportive and liberating of unmarried mothers? Can one deviate from the

³⁹ Tyler Charles, "The Secret Sexual Revolution," *Relevant*, Feb. 20, 2012, <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/life/relationship/features/28337-the-secret-sexual-revolution> (accessed February 21, 2016).

commonly accepted ideal without bringing shame, ignominy, or destruction to one's self, one's family, one's community, one's nation, and one's faith? What is more, is there in fact a singular ideal ordained for Christians within the Christian tradition worldwide, or is this actually a human development that was mystified and mythologized for certain purposes? If in fact the latter is true, and the male-headed nuclear family structure is not a Christian universal ideal, biblical mandate, or natural organization, then from whence did the ideal arise and for what purposes?

I contend that the male-headed nuclear family is not only a construct that is not unequivocally and universally supported by biblical teachings or the Christian tradition but is also a means of maintaining the patriarchal status quo of the neoliberal economic system to the detriment of these female heads of household who represent a threat to this system.

Furthermore, when a single mother identifies as Christian, especially in an evangelical congregation in the southern region of the United States, she often experiences a holistic alienation and oppression that affects not only her material well-being but also her sense of spiritual well-being, a vital component to her thriving. In this chapter, I will identify the major tenets of the metanarrative regarding the male-headed nuclear family structure as it is propagated in evangelical Christian circles, then explore the development and construction of the nuclear family structure as a metanarrative in Western culture. By revealing the constructed nature of this particular organization and exploring the contexts in which it arose, along with the purposes for which the metanarratives concerning it have been deployed, we might call into question and even deconstruct its primacy in Christian communities, open space for alternative family ideals to be celebrated, and mobilize Christian groups to address systemic injustices that victimize this population.

Identifying the Metanarrative

Single motherhood in the United States is treated like an unsightly scar, an imperfection that discredits the gleaming presentation of the metanarrative of the United States as a paragon of virtue. Many Christian groups in the United States, including a large number of evangelical Christian communities and organizations, have embraced the language of “family values”, which are often tied to the nuclear family structure. In many predominant conceptions of “family values” in the United States – both at large and in evangelical Christian circles, moral excellence is equated with the heteronormative two-parent household. But what are the tenets of these “family values” and what arguments and sources lend credibility to this metanarrative of Christian morality and the nuclear family? In this section, I will present some popular arguments regarding the centrality of the nuclear family structure for evangelical Christian communities and for other societal arenas, such as the economy and the nation. I argue that the metanarrative of the import of the male-headed nuclear family structure to Christian morality hinges upon three rationales: 1) health of the family (men, women, and children), 2) holiness of the person and Church (local and worldwide), and 3) wellbeing of the nations (domestic and foreign).

One of the bases upon which the metanarrative of the nuclear family structure is founded is the notion of the health of the family. Basically, this argues for the importance of traditional gender roles and spheres of influence for which men and women are purported to be biologically inclined – or, in Christian terms – predestined and ordained. Transgression of these roles risks the health and wellbeing of the family – economically, psychologically, and spiritually.

According to Michael Lamb, editor of *Nontraditional Families: Parenting and Child Development*, the preferability of the nuclear family structure is based on four axioms. First, children are assumed to need two parents, one of each sex. Second, family responsibilities ought

to be divided between parents, with the father as economic provider and the mother as homemaker and caretaker. Thirdly, this metanarrative asserts that mothers are naturally better suited for child rearing and caretaking than fathers, and finally, it contends that primary caretaking for children should be provided by family members – particularly the parents.⁴⁰ This ideology is part of a social movement that arose in the mid-1980s known as the New Familism, which identifies the rising divorce rates and numbers of premarital pregnancies and single-mother households as the causes of the contemporary emergence of social problems that had not previously been identified or encountered. Amongst these social ills are the AIDS epidemic, drug and alcohol abuse, rising crime rates, increasing materialism and individualism, growing international poverty rates, and more. Rather than exploring other possible political, social, and economic factors, such as the casualties of colonialism in postcolonial spaces, increasing class disparity, and the influence of feminism and other movements that empowered women and encouraged them to leave abusive situations, the New Familism found a correlation between populations affected by the aforementioned social evils and high numbers of female-headed households.

The New Familism argues that the *structure* of the family – with each member obedient to his or her hierarchical position and role – is essential to the health of all persons in the family, and especially to the children. One of the organizations that has been instrumental in the United States in spearheading the connection between the New Familism and the health of family members, especially children, is the nonpartisan Institute for American Values. Founded in 1988 to research, publish works on, and educate the public about issues of family wellbeing, of policy,

⁴⁰ Michael Lamb, ed., *Nontraditional Families: Parenting and Child Development*, (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1982), 3-4.

and of civic values, the Institute for American Values aims to “examine the status and future of the family as a social institution and examine social sources of competence, character, and citizenship in American society.”⁴¹ In a collection of papers delivered at an Institute symposium in June, 1991, various affiliates and board members of the organization presented the Institute’s rationale behind the promotion of what they view as a reclamation of the nuclear family structure as being the refocusing of adult attention on the welfare of children.

For example, board member Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, a social historian who serves as research associate at the Institute for American Values, argued in her paper that the main source of “family decline” since the 1950s has been due to cultural change that results from the rise of “destructive” values that undermine positive values such as commitment, obligation, responsibility, and sacrifice. These positive values, says Whitehead, are instilled in children and enacted by adults in the traditional nuclear family, which has been weakened as an institution by a number of what Whitehead refers to as “changes.” Amongst these changes are a new reluctance amongst spouses to stay together for the sake of their children, a shift in the connotations surrounding unwed pregnancy, a decrease in the conception of marriage as a lifelong commitment, and an increase in adults putting their own needs above those of their children.⁴² Interestingly, Whitehead attributes these changes to the rise of women entering the workforce, especially with children in the home, viewing this as an expressive and selfish pursuit. She divides the past half-century into what she says are three “distinct” cultural periods. Referring to the first period as “Traditional Familism,” Whitehead contends that the mid-1940s-

⁴¹ Institute for American Values, *Perspectives on the New Familism*, June 1991, <http://www.americanvalues.org/catalog/pdfs/wp-08.pdf> (accessed January 5, 2016)

⁴² Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, “The New Familism: Crossing the Cultural Divide,” *Perspectives on the New Familism* 8, Institute for American Values (June 1991): 7-8, <http://www.americanvalues.org/catalog/pdfs/wp-08.pdf> (accessed January 5, 2016).

mid-1960s was characterized by married couples with children, high birthrates, low divorce rates, and a high degree of marital stability. In addition, Whitehead says that this period was also marked by a “robust economy, a rising standard of living, and an expanding middle class,” while on an individual level, young adults tended to have strong identities and small egos. Furthermore, family life was idealized, individuals conformed to social norms, and men and women occupied separate spheres.⁴³

Following the “Traditional Familism,” the “Period of Individualism” began in the mid-1960s and continued through the mid-1980s. In contrast to the Traditional Familism, the Period of Individualism was characterized by greater demographic diversity, a decline in birthrates, rising divorce rates, individual and social experimentation, the deconstruction of separate gendered spheres, and the creations of “the singles’ lifestyle,” argues Whitehead. Rather than idealizing the family, this period idealized careers and sought meaning in life through self-expression. Unlike the young adults in the previous era, this era’s 20- and 30-somethings had big egos and weak identities, which Whitehead attributes to the influence of shows like *L.A. Law* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* that treated the workplace and relationships therein as the predominant space for intimacy and fulfillment – but that eliminated the presence of children.⁴⁴ Finally, Whitehead identifies the period beginning in the mid-1980s and continuing through the present as “the New Familism,” an era marked by the leveling-off of divorce rates and of women’s employment, a rise in birthrates, and a shifting away from “expressive individualism and a fascination with the self and toward greater attachments to family and commitment to

⁴³ Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, “The New Familism,” 3.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 2.

others.”⁴⁵ In her critique of the workplace and her excitement over this apparent shift away from career ambitions and towards family aspirations, Whitehead maintains that work life and family life are mutually exclusive. According to her point of view, “time is scarcer than money,” and time and attention are the primary “currency” of the family.⁴⁶

We can ascertain from Whitehead’s argument that she associates individualism and self-centeredness with the influx of women seeking employment outside of the home and their delaying of marriage and family with the increased availability of contraception and the passage of acts such as the Equal Employment Act and the Civil Rights Act during the mid-1960s. However, these periods also gave rise to an increase amongst the American people of collective identity and the mobilization of these collective identities through social movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Second Wave of the Women’s Movement, the Student Movements of this era, the Red Power Movement, postcolonialism on the international scene, and the Chicano Movement, to name a few. This certainly calls into question the notion that this period can be characterized – at least monolithically – as individualistic and self-serving. Furthermore, Whitehead assumes that women have the option of staying home with their children – not only presuming that whether they are married or not is in the control of women and is a choice they make based on how selfish or selfless they are but also presupposing that all married couples make enough money to live off a single salary. Moreover, nowhere in her paper does she allow for men to stay home with children but instead presumes that this would be – and ought to be – the decision women make for the sake of their families. Finally, Whitehead’s division of the past 60-plus years into the aforementioned eras and her characterization of each era seems arbitrary;

⁴⁵ Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, “The New Familism,” 2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

she gives no real evidence and cites no sources to back up her assertions. However, we can deduce from her work that she believes that the traditional nuclear family – and the rise of the New Familism – represent a social organization that is inherently selfless and stable and instills in youth strength and humility, thus producing a virtuous society with a healthy economy.

Agreeing with Whitehead on several points, David Popenoe, president of the Institute for American Values, professor of sociology, and Associate Dean for the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Rutgers University, also delivered an address entitled “Fostering the New Familism: A Goal for America” at the June 1991 symposium. In this presentation, Popenoe states that the family as an institution has weakened since the 1950s, evidenced by increases in divorce, in single-parent households, and in nonmarital teen pregnancies.⁴⁷ Rather than attributing this strictly to the increased participation of women in the workplace as Whitehead did, Popenoe points out that much of the decrease in the emphasis on the importance of the traditional nuclear family has come through a sort of “outsourcing” of the functions of the family to institutions such as religious organizations, schools, and the government, as well as through a diminishing of extended family networks. This, according to Popenoe, has resulted in the Western world in the isolation of the “nuclear family” from community and kin networks, but, even worse, in the present day we are seeing the dismantling of even that isolated nuclear family.⁴⁸ Unlike Whitehead, Popenoe praises the movements for women’s equality and participation in the workplace, for the sharing of the role of breadwinner between spouses, and for the tolerance of cultural and lifestyle diversity. However, in a swift move, Popenoe states that the problem with

⁴⁷ David Popenoe, “Fostering the New Familism: A Goal for America,” *Perspectives on the New Familism* 8, Institute for American Values (June 1991): 20, <http://www.americanvalues.org/catalog/pdfs/wp-08.pdf> (accessed January 5, 2016).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 20

these movements that might benefit adults is that they inevitably hurt children. As Popenoe claims, “A society that maximizes opportunities for adult expressive individualism is not a society that enhances healthy child development.”⁴⁹

While Whitehead targeted women in the workforce as a primary cause of the disintegration of the nuclear family structure and the endangering of child and community health, Popenoe treats this factor as a secondary symptom rather than a cause, a result of an underlying problem. According to Popenoe, the real culprit in what he sees as the rise of immoral and unstable youth culture is the demise of the traditional nuclear family structure through the rise of alternative family structures. Popenoe claims that many of the changes in family life in recent years are good, such as the accessibility of divorce for “seriously abused” women, the increased tolerance of nontraditional families that allow children of these families to escape lifelong stigma, and the companionship of equals in marriage that increases the emotional satisfaction of these unions.⁵⁰ However, he argues that these positives are only relative and that he has “never met a child who did not want to be raised by both biological parents who stayed together and cooperated to raise the child.”⁵¹ In fact, says Popenoe, the overall success rate of single-parent and step-parent families is bleak. As Popenoe writes, “Intact nuclear families can clearly be dysfunctional, but the weight of the evidence strongly points to the generally lower quality of postnuclear families, especially single-parent and step-families.”⁵² Because a single mother must find employment, this threatens the wellbeing of her children, for, as Popenoe argues, successful

⁴⁹ David Popenoe, “Fostering the New Familism: A Goal for America,” 21.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 21, 23.

childrearing necessitates copious amounts of contact time between the parent and the child.⁵³ He concludes his paper by claiming that there is no substitute for the nuclear family when it comes to ensuring successful childrearing, strong communities, and a bright future.⁵⁴

Although Popenoe recognizes the detriment of patriarchy and, in a sort of de jure way, the prohibition of women from the workplace, he clearly narrows the number of situations in which women could seek employment outside the home without ostensibly threatening the wellbeing of their children. Interestingly, no similar obligation to choosing childcare over career is placed on the male, though Popenoe does allow that increased sharing of domestic duties and paternal involvement in childrearing is a positive thing. Furthermore, his attempts to praise the “progress” of women’s movements to increase opportunities for women, to encourage tolerance of difference and diversity, and to create for women means of escape from unhealthy and abusive relationships falls short when he follows up his approval with a fervent argument that the only successful family form is the traditional two-parent nuclear family. And while this family is supposedly egalitarian, the father remains the breadwinner, and, as Estelle B. Freedman’s work on the history of gender relationships has shown, access to financial capital increases one’s power.⁵⁵ In addition, Popenoe and Whitehead both focus on the form of the family over the function, as well as the quantity of time a parent spends with a child over the quality of the time.

Finally, in a similar vein to Whitehead’s work, Popenoe fails to present any actual research or evidence that ties the social ills he mentions (suicide, depression, adolescent delinquency, obesity and anorexia, drug abuse, unwed pregnancy) directly to nontraditional

⁵³ David Popenoe, “Fostering the New Familism: A Goal for America,” 21.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 23.

⁵⁵ Estelle B. Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*, (New York: Random House, 2002).

family structures. If such a correlation exists, a number of variables other than simply the absence of a parent or the experience of a divorce can certainly influence the manifestation of these problems. For example, lack of access to mental health care due to strained finances, resulting from an economic system that rewards men's work disproportionately higher than women's work, might explain the rise in suicide, depression, obesity, and anorexia, as can the increased availability of knowledge to and influence of celebrity and world events on adolescents in our digital and globalized world. But what comes through clearly in both Whitehead's and Popenoe's papers is that the New Familism views the nuclear family as a means of ensuring the health and wellbeing primarily of the children, though also of the parents involved, while alternatives to this formula are dangerous and selfish.

A second rationale behind the push for the traditional nuclear family structure is that it is purported, especially in evangelical Christian circles in Westernized areas, to support the personal holiness of the individual, as well as the holiness of the local and ecumenical Christian church. According to this argument, the Bible urges conformity to a certain formula of relationality between the sexes, based on the notion that God created men and women for particular, sexually differentiated roles and behaviors. For women, this entails remaining sexually abstinent until marriage, marrying a Christian man and bearing children, identifying the care of the family as their primary ministry and vocation, supporting their spouses as a "helpmeet" and submitting to their authority when necessary, and encouraging other women to follow this path.⁵⁶ By doing so, argues this form of gendered covenant theology, women are

⁵⁶ Debi Pearl, author of *Created to Be His Help Meet*, interprets this term to mean "assistant" or "helper." She contends that this term can in no way indicate that the woman is to be the partner or equal of the man; instead, the woman is created to make her husband complete. However, as Rachel Held Evans explains, the Hebrew term for "helpmeet", found in the Hebrew Bible a total of 21 times, is "*ezer*". This word is used twice to refer to Eve, three times to refer to nations to whom Israel appealed for military aid, and sixteen times to refer to God as Israel's helper. In these contexts, *ezer* connotes "both benevolence and strength," writes Evans, and is apparently a popular Jewish

obeying a divinely sanctioned hierarchy and performing their ordained roles, and in so doing, living in obedience to God's will. Deviating from this or failing to find pleasure in this obedience not only mars one's relationship with God but also endangers the ministry and holiness of the Church as a whole due to the potential repercussions and influence of a disobedient member in their midst.

Prime examples of the concern over obedience to the nuclear family structure and attendant complementary sex roles as the insurance of personal and communal holiness, Focus on the Family and the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood are also two of the most influential evangelical organizations involved in disseminating Christian messages worldwide. Focus on the Family is an evangelical Christian non-profit begun in 1977 by Dr. James Dobson, former clinical professor of pediatrics at the USC School of Medicine that has extended its influence internationally through its multimedia productions.⁵⁷ Concerned about what he deemed to be the breakdown of the traditional family and the negative repercussions this had on the culture at large, Dobson founded Focus on the Family to "cooperate with the Holy Spirit in sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with as many people as possible by nurturing and defending the God-ordained institution of the family and promoting biblical truths worldwide."⁵⁸ To reach a wide and international audience, he formulated radio programs, published several books,

name for boys. Furthermore, it is often used in conjunction with "*kenegdo*", or "as in front of him," which implies that the helpmeet or *ezer* of Genesis 2 is Adam's "perfect match."

Debi Pearl, *Created to Be His Help Meet*, (Pleasantville, TN: No Greater Joy Ministries, 2004), 96-97.

Rachel Held Evans, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, 207.

⁵⁷ Focus on the Family, "About Our Founder," accessed January 7, 2015, http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us/james-dobson.aspx.

⁵⁸ Focus on the Family, "Foundational Values," accessed January 7, 2016, http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us/guiding-principles.aspx.

spearheaded the production of a number of television programs, series, and films for children and adults alike, began a magazine that today still has a large readership, and, more recently, established a popular internet presence with blogs and articles composed by a sizable staff. Focus on the Family has six guiding principles: 1) the preeminence of evangelism, which begins with our own families, 2) the permanence of marriage as a “sacred covenant” and “basic building block of human civilization,” 3) the value of children, 4) the sanctity of human life, 5) the importance of social responsibility, explicitly to the institutions of the family, the church, and the government, which Focus on the Family cites as God-ordained and reflective of the Divine nature, and 6) the value of male and female as complementary partners in marriage or as celibate single individuals.⁵⁹ Much of their website, associated writings, and media productions aim to communicate these principles and are translated in Middle Eastern, Asian, South American, and African languages to become accessible to the global audience served by the international Focus on the Family offices in 13 different countries.

The main message communicated through the foundational tenets of Focus on the Family’s work is that men and women need one another in order to create a godly, whole family, and they need one another to perform particular and sexually differentiated roles in a hierarchical relationship. Deviance from this – whether through single parenting (especially single motherhood), through egalitarianism, stay-at-home fatherhood, or working motherhood, through divorce, or through questioning the authority of churches, governments, husbands, or even particular social orders such as the nuclear family or capitalism and the class structure in the United States - is a violation of God’s order and will. When women become single mothers,

⁵⁹ Focus on the Family, “Foundational Values,” accessed January 7, 2016, http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us/guiding-principles.aspx.

especially through pregnancy outside of marriage, they embody a deviation from several of these values. Focus on the Family teaches that sex prior to marriage and comprehensive sex education “does not support God’s design for sexuality.”⁶⁰ In a Focus on the Family article on premarital sex, analysts report that the percentage of high-school students engaging in sex has dropped to less than 50%, and teen pregnancy decreased from 15% in 1990 to 10% in 2009. Yet, unwed pregnancy in the United States is rising, and 89% of males and 92% of females have engaged in sex by the time they are 24.⁶¹ What this appears to imply is that more young people are waiting to have sex until they reach adulthood, more teens who are sexually active are using contraception, and those unmarried women who become pregnant are older at the time of conception. However, this article does not celebrate these figures or trends but is instead concerned that more people are not practicing abstinence before marriage, which the article argues “helps build a solid foundation upon which one can build a family and a society.” Engaging in sex outside of marriage, the evidence of which unmarried mothers who became pregnant prior to marriage bear constantly, is said to “violate God’s plan” and is an act of “[casting] aside His [*sic*] guidance [and lead] us down a path of spiritual devastation.”⁶² In other words, according to the underlying theology at play, single motherhood is the result of a violation of God’s will, of an act of impulsive selfishness and sinfulness, and of damage in one’s relationship with God and spiritual walk, and it leads to a continual violation of God’s will as the

⁶⁰ Focus on the Family Issue Analysts, “Abstinence Before Marriage: Cause for Concern,” (accessed Jan. 9, 2016) <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/socialissues/family/abstinence-before-marriage/abstinence-before-marriage-cause-for-concern>.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Focus on the Family Issue Analysts, “Abstinence Before Marriage: Cause for Concern.”

mother takes on “male roles” and authority reserved for husbands in the male-headed nuclear family structure.

In another Focus on the Family article addressing the notion that Christians divorce at the same rate as non-Christians, the author Glenn T. Stanton cites the research of University of Connecticut sociologist Bradley Wright, which reports that “active Christians” have a divorce rate of around 35%, while Christians who do not attend religious services regularly have a divorce rate of 60%.⁶³ Additionally, University of Virginia sociology professor and director of the National Marriage Project W. Bradford Wilcox, found that couples who self-reported as being “nominally Protestant” in the United States are 20% more likely to divorce than non-Christians, whereas “active conservative Protestants” are 35% less likely to divorce than non-Christians.⁶⁴ The most interesting data Stanton cites is the research done by University of Denver sociologist Scott Stanley and other researchers from the Oklahoma Marriage Study, which reports that those who self-identified as being more religious also described their marriages as being more satisfying and committed than those self-identified as less religious, and this pattern apparently held across income, age at marriage, and education variables.⁶⁵

However, what I believe is most significant for my research is the way that Stanton interprets this data. First of all, the original research made an interesting choice in naming options for self-categorization as “Protestant – nominal,” “Protestant – Conservative,”

⁶³ Glenn T. Stanton, “Divorce Rate in the Church – As High as in the World?” February 2011, http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us/focus-findings/marriage/divorce-rate-in-the-church-as-high-as-the-world.aspx.

⁶⁴ W. Bradford Wilcox and Elizabeth Williamson, “The Cultural Contradictions of Mainline Family Ideology and Practice,” in *American Religions and the Family*, eds. Don S. Browning and David A. Clairmont (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 50.

⁶⁵ C.A. Johnson, et al., *Marriage in Oklahoma: 2001 Baseline Statewide Survey on Marriage and Divorce*, (Oklahoma City, OK: Oklahoma Department of Human Services 2002), 25, 26.

“Protestant – active Conservative,” “Catholic,” “Catholic (nominal),” and “Catholic (active)” for Christians.⁶⁶ Not only are Wilcox’s categories limited and problematic (after all, do they not belie the assumption that Protestants who self-identify as liberal cannot be active?), but also Stanton translates Wilcox’s categories of Protestants to “Christians” and ignores Catholic statistics, even though all categories of Catholics show divorce rates lower than non-religious Americans. What is more, Stanton also offers a gloss of these categories to say that those who self-report as “Protestant – active Conservative” are those who “generally take their faith seriously, living not as *perfect* disciples, but serious disciples.”⁶⁷ This statement reveals a readiness to read into study participants’ self-reporting a great deal about their spirituality and faith, which I maintain discloses a problematic inclination to believe that married couples who self-identity as active conservative Protestants are more likely than those who self-identify differently and/or have been divorced to be committed Christians. Furthermore, Stanton fails to include actual quantitative data from the Oklahoma Marriage Study research and instead opts to include a quote from the study directors about the quality of the participants’ marriage and their self-categorization regarding church attendance. What is more, this study does not mention whether or not the correlation between increased marital satisfaction and apparent stability and religiosity was present in all races, geographic regions, and sexes.

Several factors seem to be overlooked in Stanton’s article and interpretation of the various studies, which he concludes indicate that “the more you are involved in the actual practice of your faith in real ways – through submitting yourself to a serious body of believers,

⁶⁶ W. Bradford Wilcox and Elizabeth Williamson, “The Cultural Contradictions of Mainline Family Ideology and Practice,” 50.

⁶⁷ Glenn T. Stanton, “Divorce Rate in the Church – As High as in the World?”

learning regularly from scripture, being in communion with God through prayer individually and with your spouse and children, and having friends around us who challenge us to take our marriages seriously – the greater the difference this makes in strengthening [...] our marriages.”⁶⁸ For one, Stanton does not seem to account for chronology of divorce and loss of religious affiliation. For example, it could be possible that one’s divorce occurred while the individual still attended church regularly or would have reported as an active Protestant or Christian, and that life circumstances changed the individual’s faith commitment post-divorce. In this case, no correlation between divorce and faith commitment could be made. Additionally, as I mentioned before, the categories and Stanton’s interpretation of what they indicate about the participants seem limited and far-fetched, respectively. Many Christians do not identify as conservative but do identify as active in their faith, and many people who do not attend church regularly might pray, read Christian texts, and gather with other like-minded individuals, three behaviors which Stanton claims are attendant with active faith. Furthermore, many people may be hesitant to identify as “active” Christians if they do not attend church regularly, regardless of their regular behaviors, commitment to Christian values, and beliefs, and many who attend church regularly may more readily identify as “active,” regardless of whether or not they engage in the behaviors which Stanton seems to assume they do. Finally, Stanton does not account for variables that influence the divorce rates amongst those who are actively involved in Christian faith communities. Because many evangelical and conservative Christian circles place a large emphasis on the “sanctity of marriage” and also on the submission of a wife to her husband, it is possible that some Christians feel that divorce is not an option or that asserting one’s dissatisfaction – especially in the case of a wife with her husband – is a sinful breach of a

⁶⁸ Glenn T. Stanton, “Divorce Rate in the Church – As High as in the World.”

divinely sanctioned order that entails a wife's happiness with whatever her husband chooses for their family and relationship. Because of the stigma surrounding divorced or single parents who do not marry, many may opt for marriages that are not satisfying or functional and may choose to ignore or not report – or may even fail to see – the negative aspects of these relationships. What we can glean from Stanton's article, though, is that Focus on the Family believes that a central component of Christian evangelism ought to be the emphasis on abstinence prior to marriage and the male-headed nuclear family structure as both obedience to God's will and also a sort of greater conductivity of God's power through individuals and faith communities whose members adhere to this formula.

A second notable evangelical organization that places a premium on the male-headed nuclear family structure as a conduit for healthy spiritual relationships and God's blessing is the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. Like Focus on the Family, this organization also had its beginnings in the late-1980s and concentrates its efforts on establishing a theological basis for complementarianism and encouraging in Christian groups and individuals a collective embrace of traditional gender roles as God's plan for the good of the family, the Church, and society. Led by popular pastor John Piper and other influential faith leaders, the CBMW composed a document known as the Danvers Statement that has been instrumental in sectarian and evangelical complementarian and New Familism efforts. According to this statement, the Council is deeply concerned about the influence of "feminist egalitarianism" that has disrupted the Biblical harmony of male headship and wifely support of that headship within the nuclear family and the Christian church. The results of deviations from this model of male leadership in the family, church, and society and of male-female complementarianism as the basis for a functioning and holy family, church, and society "will lead to increasingly destructive

consequences in our families, our churches, and the culture at large.”⁶⁹ Furthermore, the CBMW website and John Piper’s own website, www.desiringgod.com, feature numerous articles on the biblical propriety and righteous necessity of the nuclear family, complementarianism, and sexual abstinence prior to marriage. For example, current CBMW president Owen Strachan warns in “Building a Marriage Culture: Pastors, Teach Your People” of a “secularist culture” that “softens our views of divorce,” encourages sympathy with gay marriage, and increases our appetites for sexual promiscuity, which destroys our souls. Strachan insists that the Bible gives God’s clear guidance on these topics and points to the primacy and holiness of heterosexual marriage since the Bible “begins with the marriage of a man and woman and ends with the marriage of the divine groom and his [*sic*] blood-bought bride.” According to Strachan, marriage is, then, the hope of humankind, and the Church will languish and suffer if it does not speak out in support of these ideas of male leadership, complementarianism, abstinence, and the nuclear family.⁷⁰

In another document on the family and Christianity, published by The Family Committee of the Coalition on Revival, the authors attempt to explain the vitality of the family to the needed revival of the Christian Church in the Global North. According to the treatise “The Christian World View of the Family,” family is said to be “the fiber from which all godly human institutions are woven[...and the] fabric of both Church and society will disintegrate if its very fiber is torn.” This fiber is torn apart, argues the Committee, by divorce, careerism and materialism – which are exhibited by mothers leaving the home for the work force voluntarily or by force because of economic pressures and a lack of charity and justice from others, feminism

⁶⁹ “The Danvers Statement,” The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, accessed January 16, 2016, <http://cbmw.org/uncategorized/the-danvers-statement/>.

⁷⁰ Owen Strachan, “Building a Marriage Culture: Pastors, Teach Your People,” The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, accessed January 22, 2016, <http://cbmw.org/topics/homosexuality/pastors-teach-your-people/>.

that convinces men to relinquish their “biblical” authority over women, laws and public education that have overtaken many of the family’s biblical duties, and media indoctrination in anti-family values. Like the Danvers Statement, this document includes a lengthy list of affirmations, as well as action items. Amongst the former are the insistence that God ordained the family as an institution designed to reflect God’s image on earth and to bring the world into submission to God’s plan. However, the family is only “the family” in the biblical, divinely sanctioned sense of the term, argues this article, if it is the nuclear family consisting of a heterosexual married couple and their natural and adopted children and of related branches of nuclear families descending from common ancestors. This statement explicitly denies that the Bible supports any other definition or conception of family and that the Church should oppose any attempts by laws or society to recognize any other form of family. Unlike the Danvers Statement, though, this document specifically recognizes “broken families” with minor children as worthy of compassion and support and urges the Church to extend God’s grace, strength, forgiveness, and guidance to single parents who humbly and repentantly seek God. It even states that single-parent families are not doomed to failure, but it does sanction “church discipline” to be implemented against the unmarried pregnant woman, so that she might repent and so that the Church cannot reject or shun her. Furthermore, this Committee urges evangelical churches to request the resignation of all church leaders – staff or volunteer – who have been divorced and not “proven” contrite and repentant, and argues that divorced pastors ought to be “re-established” in alternate careers. Until evangelical churches take these steps and commit to these values, insists the Committee, the needed Christian revival and reformation will not come to our world.⁷¹

⁷¹ George Rekers and Jerry Regiers,” The Family Committee of the Coalition on Revival eds. George Rekers and Jerry Regiers, accessed January 20, 2016, www.reformation.net/COR_Docs/Christian_Worldview_Family.pdf

These and other articles on these sites clearly convey an anxiety concerning the “cost” of deviating from the “norm” of the nuclear family structure. In an interesting move, the complementarian model of the nuclear family is depicted as no longer being the norm but instead being an endangered concept, threatened by the increased secularization of society. By adhering to complementarianism, though, Christians are told that they can bring revival to the Church and can be, in a sense, rebels who are fighting against the obvious social injustices and tragedies, which, we are told, are results of humans – and specifically Christians – who have fallen prey to the temptation to question traditional Western teachings on male-female and family relationships. In other words, we have before us the operation of a metanarrative: we are either actively embracing complementarian families, led by two heterosexual married parents, lifelong marriage, and premarital abstinence and speaking out against divorce, homosexuality, and premarital sex, or we are wishy-washy Christians who have given in to the pressures of this world to compromise our morals – and are thus threatening not only our own purity but also the integrity and power of the Church in our world. There is no other faithful way.

Thus, by these arguments, single mothers are themselves marked by sin – through premarital sex, through not making a marriage with their children’s biological fathers occur or last, and through taking on the authoritative roles of head of household and breadwinner. Not only this, but single mothers are threats to their families’ spirituality, as well as the sanctity and power of their church communities and the Christian Church worldwide. While some of the evangelical groups mention recognize the importance of welcoming single-parent families, many of these groups advocate for the administration of “church discipline” before the unmarried

mother can reenter the fellowship of the church, others require the demonstration of repentance as a prerequisite for the extension of love, support, and grace, and all of the ones mentioned agree that the female-headed family is not ideal and deviates from God's plan. Additionally, most of these groups treat the unmarried mother as an object of sympathy who stands in need of the church's grace rather than as a strong, faithful, and Christlike example of self-giving love who demonstrates the power of Christ through her work in and outside the home. None of the texts reviewed for this project or the organizations mentioned as of yet have mentioned the possibility or propriety of a single mother as a ministry leader in the Christian church. The exception to this is the leadership of single-parent ministries, which may include as leaders formerly single mothers who are now married and who often lead with their husbands.⁷²

Finally, in addition to the importance of the nuclear family to familial and child health and to personal and ecclesial holiness and effectiveness, the New Familism movements in evangelical Christianity tend to argue that the nuclear family structure is also a key to the redemption of society or the success of our nation or world. As many of the aforementioned texts and organizations have attested, the concept of the necessity of the nuclear family and complementarian gender relations within these families to the wellbeing of society is implicitly and frequently invoked in evangelical and even non-sectarian political and social teachings. One of the groups that we have previously mentioned is the Institute for American Values. Although the name of this organization mentions nothing about family, this group's express purpose is to

⁷² The only example I have found of a staff person in an evangelical church in the United States led by a single mother is the case of Redeemer Evangelical Covenant Church in Carrollton, TX. Interestingly, I am the case study for this. Redeemer hired me as the Youth Pastor in 2011 when I was a single mother who had never been married. However, I became engaged during the interview process for the position, and this information was shared with the search committee. In terms of single mothers leading ministries in evangelical congregations on a volunteer basis, this information is more difficult to find, but I have not yet found examples of this in my interviews, church visits, or internet searches.

reinstitute and redeem “American values” by reinvigorating in the United States the male-headed nuclear family structure. In *Disturbing the Nest: Family Change and Decline in Modern Societies*, David Popenoe, leader of this institute, writes that the United States is experiencing a problematic trend toward individualism,⁷³ and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, also a leader at this institute, maintains in her book *The Divorce Culture* that the United States shifted from an “ethic of obligation to others to an obligation to self” when women began gaining “freedoms and opportunities in the world of work and public life.”⁷⁴ In such a way, Whitehead attaches the shift towards self-centeredness and individualism – the decline of our society – on the presence of women outside the home. Furthermore, Whitehead describes single mothers as engaging in an “expressive pursuit” and as championing the rights of single mothers while condemning those who are concerned about the impact of single parenthood on children, as though these go hand-in-hand.⁷⁵

One of the ways that the male-headed nuclear family is communicated as a bedrock of societal wellbeing is by speaking about feminism as a threat or danger to the Christian message. Michiaki and Hildegard Horie, evangelical ministers in British Columbia, write in their book *Whatever Became of Fathering?* that women have been legitimately oppressed throughout history, though there are ample examples of women in all cultures and eras who have asserted their agency and become influential leaders. However, they argue, the ambition of men to dominate over women rather than to co-labor together in love and equality with women has now “[sowed] hatred and bitterness”, which has manifested in hatred and bitterness in women towards

⁷³ David Popenoe, *Disturbing the Nest: Family Change and Decline in Modern Societies*, (Piscataway, NJ: Aldine, 1988).

⁷⁴ Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The Divorce Culture*.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

men. In fact, the Hories contend that “the mechanism at work today’s feminist movement” is an “inferiority complex” in which women “are now trying to prove their own power with vehemence” by doing away with anything that restricts women in any way, including marriage.⁷⁶ Similarly, the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood exists for the express purpose of countering the allegedly dangerous effects of feminism on society and on Christians themselves, many of whom have become advocates of Christian feminism and feminist theology. In evangelical circles, Christianity is regarded as the answer to society’s problems and as a redemptive source. Therefore, when feminism and Christianity are held up as mutually exclusive and in fact inimical to one another, the empowerment of women to lead a household – even if by default in the absence of a male spouse – is seen as a dangerous and sinful compromise that panders to the world’s wicked ways instead of cleaving to the correct righteous path that could cure this wickedness.

Another way in which New Familism amongst evangelical Christians in the United States equates the male-headed nuclear family with societal, national, and even global success is by citing statistics that appear to convey significant correlations between family structures and social ills or well-being. Many of these statistics are interpreted as indicating a correlation between social ills and families headed by unmarried mothers in order to discredit this family form as a threat to societal welfare, especially in the United States where citizens often feel a strong sense of national exceptionalism. Exemplifying this, David Blankenhorn, author of *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* and founder and president of the Institute for American Values, argues that the underlying source of the most important social

⁷⁶ Michiaki Horie and Hildegard Horie, *Whatever Became of Fathering? Its Rise and Fall...And How Parents Can Rebuild It*, trans. Virginia Larsen, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 49.

problems in our nation today, and especially of violence, is the declining paternal investment.⁷⁷ According to Blankenhorn, the growing problem with domestic violence in American society correlates with the rise of single-parent families, though he admits that reliable trend-line data does not exist.⁷⁸ Why then does he jump to the conclusion that being raised by a single mother is the cause of an increase in domestic violence? The Center for Family Justice reports that over 15 million children in the United States witness domestic violence this year and that a quarter of American women will be abused by an intimate partner or spouse in their lifetime.⁷⁹ Rather than some deficit in single-mother families that produces abusers, these statistics seem to provide at least a valid hypothesis that women are feeling increasingly empowered to both report domestic violence when it occurs and to leave abusive partners. However, possible reasons for an apparent correlation – no matter how tenuous – between an increase in single-parent families and an increase in reports of domestic violence in American society remain unexplored; the only interpretation Blankenhorn offers is that the rise of single mothers is connected with the degradation of social welfare.

Such interpretation of statistical correlations as causations constitute straw man arguments, as do many of the arguments regarding single motherhood as a threat to the integrity and well-being of our society. But some proponents of the nuclear family structure tie this form of family to the wellbeing of society without much rationale – and many times, the argument is accepted unreflectively. In April, 2012, the *New York Times* published an article by former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett, which argues that the family was historically the first

⁷⁷ David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 27.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷⁹ “Statistics,” The Center for Family Justice. <http://www.centerforfamilyjustice.org/community-education/statistics/2016> (accessed January 25, 2016)

form of community and government and is thus the bedrock of our civilization. In this first proposal, we can see a basic assumption that the concept and form of family throughout history has been static and resembles – or is even identical to – the Western nuclear family. Bennett then asserts that “[if] we have stronger families we will have stronger schools, stronger churches, and stronger communities with less poverty and less crime.” Significantly, though, Bennett speaks about the “illegitimacy rate” in North America as evidence that the family structure is dissolving, thus denying single parents and their children the status of family or possibility of being a strong unit.⁸⁰ What the arguments of Blankenhorn, Dafoe, Bennett, and other reveal is a common argumentation strategy – essentially a straw man fallacy. Instead of exploring all possible explanations for correlations or for the negative experiences of single-parent families (such as poverty, school dropout rates, health problems, and crime perpetration), proponents of the New Familism often vilify the single mothers and tout fathers as the magical antidote to social ills.

Wearing a Scarlet Letter: Sex, Stigma, and the Single Mother in Evangelical Christian Communities

The metanarratives concerning family that are operable in American society and run particularly strong in evangelical Christian circles tout the nuclear family structure – usually with an implicit or explicit stipulation regarding male “headship” or authority – as the only acceptable relational/familial form for the wellbeing of its members, for the holiness of the individual and the Christian Church, and for the welfare and future success of society and the nation as a whole. However, this metanarrative goes hand-in-hand with another metanarrative that more directly vilifies single mothers in evangelical circles and positions them as deserving of social struggles,

⁸⁰ William Bennett, “Stronger Families, Stronger Societies,” *The New York Times*, April 24, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/04/24/are-family-values-outdated/stronger-families-stronger-societies>, (accessed January 19, 2016).

even as they may stand “forgiven” by their church communities and ostensibly their God. This metanarrative concerns the appropriate context for practicing one’s sexuality and teaches that premarital sex is a sin, a mistake with dire consequences, an active rebellion against God. Single mothers bear the mark of their “rebellion” and sin for the duration of their years as a single parent. Once again, though, we see that in marriage, this “problem” is at least concealed; in other words, the man/husband is positioned as the redeemer of the sinful woman.

Regarding the impropriety of premarital sex and the sanctity of abstinence until marriage, the metanarrative is predicated generally on the same three-part formula as the metanarrative concerning the importance of the male-headed nuclear family structure. That is, according to many forms of Western evangelical Christianity, sex before marriage risks the health and well-being of the participants and their present or future children, destroys – at least temporarily – the relationship between participants and God and the purity of the church community in its relationship to the Divine, and threatens societal welfare and the presumed moral status and success of the United States on the global scene. In an illustration of how this metanarrative is deployed to paint the consequences of premarital sex as unhealthy for participants and their future children, a 2007 article entitled “Fatherless Homes Are Increasing, but the Gospel Provides Hope” maintains that “the fallout from fatherless homes is devastating, particularly for boys, who need role models for spiritual development and authentic manhood, roles best played by a committed father.”⁸¹ Similarly, twenty-something-year-old Chris Martin, an employee of Lifeway Christian Bookstore and seminary student, writes in his blog *Millennial/Evangelical* that single motherhood is an “epidemic” plaguing his generation of young adults due to this

⁸¹ The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, “Fatherless Homes Are Increasing, But the Gospel Provides Hope,” October 12, 2007, accessed January 12, 2016, <http://www.cbmw.org/uncategorized/fatherless-homes-are-increasing-but-the-gospel-provides-hope/>

generation's choice to "love sex" more than they love their children.⁸² Another article, this one in the July/August 2008 issue of *Today's Christian Woman*, deals with the painful repercussions of premarital sex for parents who must then reveal to their own teenagers their past sexual choices. The author, Jodi Washington, compares her adolescence with that of her daughters, calling the decisions she and her now-husband made to have premarital sex "dark and dangerous", in contrast to her daughters who "planned to be virgins on their wedding nights" and "signed contracts with God not to have sex before marriage."⁸³ By telling her children about her past, the author writes, she hopes to teach them "compassion for people who choose sin over the safety of God's unpolluted path."⁸⁴ In other words, the moral of this story is that those who decide to have sex before marriage – like some unmarried mothers – are to be treated as objects of compassion and grace, though they are to remain firmly in our minds sinners who have chosen a dangerous and impure course.

Some arguments that vilify premarital sex warn of the psychological, relational, and health damage that may result. The Porch, a Dallas-based singles' ministry at the megachurch Watermark sponsored a blog post by Jonathan Pokluda in March, 2013, entitled "Why Premarital Sex Is a Bad Thing." Pokluda writes that each year in the United States, there are 3 million unplanned pregnancies, 54% of which occur while the couple is using birth control, and 1.2 million abortions. Additionally, there are 19 million new cases of STDs reported each year. He then speaks of the dangers associated with the production of neurotransmitters during sex: oxytocin bonds us to "whomever [or] whatever may be present at that time," and this and other

⁸² Chris Martin, "Single Mothers and Fatherless Children: Debris in the Wake of Millennials' Sexual Ethics," *Chrimartin.blog*, May 8, 2015, <http://www.millennialevanglical.com/single-mothers-and-fatherless-children-the-bi-products-of-millennials-sexual-ethics/>

⁸³ Jodi Washington, "Parents with a Past," *Today's Christian Woman*, July/August 2008, 27.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 28.

neurotransmitters are addictive. Furthermore, says Pokluda, premarital sex “wrecks [our] marriage before it starts” by bonding us to other previous sexual partners in addition to our spouses. Pokluda uses his own experience as, in his words, a sex addict prior to his conversion to Christianity to illustrate this point. According to Pokluda, he was thankful to God at his wedding that he had “escaped the consequences [of premarital sex]: specifically, that [he] did not have an STD, a child born out of wedlock, or a psycho ex-girlfriend waiting outside to kill me.” However, he states that after a blissful first year of marriage, his second year with his wife was a “prison” and a “struggle” due to his lack of knowledge about how to love his wife.⁸⁵ Pokluda’s article displays a common pattern of reasoning regarding premarital sex: God is protecting us from harming ourselves and others by telling us not to have premarital sex. This harm is considered both the reason why we are not to engage in sex outside of wedlock and the natural outcome of transgressing this boundary, and these consequences include, according to Pokluda: children out of wedlock, addiction, disease, psychosis and old relationships that will not let go, and an inability to love fully once we are married. These consequences seem quite dire, and thus, the unmarried mothers who have become pregnant outside of wedlock must, according to this logic, committed a tragic cardinal sin and are thus bearing the unavoidable curses of this harm. The single mother, with her unfathered child, her shame, her potential diseases, her emotional and psychological damage and baggage, becomes a cautionary tale against the dangers of premarital sex.

The warnings go beyond the psychological and relational damage that this article mentions. In the Youth Specialties book *Sex Has a Price Tag* by Pam Stenzel, Stenzel argues that the number-one fear of teenagers who consider having sex is pregnancy. According to

⁸⁵ Jonathan Pokluda, “Why Premarital Sex Is a Bad Idea,” The Porch, accessed February 22, 2016, <http://www.theporchdallas.com/why-premarital-sex-is-a-bad-idea/>

Stenzel, 90% of teen couples who do not use birth control while having sex conceive, and of those, 90% of males will abandon their pregnant girlfriends. Additionally, Stenzel says that pregnant teens are seven times more likely to commit suicide as other girls their age, have a 30% change of dropping out of school, and have a 50% chance of living at or below the poverty level. The citation of this data is designed to communicate the cost to one's well-being and that of their potential children if they have premarital sex and become pregnant. She concludes this section of her book warning against the dangers of premarital pregnancy by mentioning that the mother has three options – to keep the baby, to get an abortion, or to put the child up for adoption – and that “[not] one of them is good.”⁸⁶ Notably, she does not include in her book footnotes or source citations indicating where these statistics were found or under what conditions these studies were conducted.

Stenzel's case for abstinence before marriage does not stop with warnings about pregnancy and the consequences to mother and child. She also writes that premarital sex is dangerous to the emotional well-being of the participants, as well as to present and future human relationships. She cites that the “experts” – those who have “personally lived through the emotional aftermath of sex before marriage” – report feeling guilt, depression, rejection, mistrust, sadness, loneliness, fear, anger, and self-reproach.⁸⁷ In addition, says Stenzel, couples who engage in premarital sex inevitably view one another differently afterwards, with the female losing trust in her partner and the male losing respect for his girlfriend.⁸⁸ Furthermore, she argues that premarital sex with someone other than one's spouse produces anxiety in marriage

⁸⁶ Pam Stenzel, *Sex Has a Price Tag: Discussions about Sexuality, Spirituality, and Self Respect*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 53-54.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

partners due to mental comparisons to former partners.⁸⁹ Yet no attention is given to the possibility that the negative emotions experienced by her “experts” might be due to the shaming operation of the metanarratives regarding sexuality in their lives – or perhaps by the lack of discussion about the ethics of sex.

Stenzel and others treat marriage as a safe space in which sex occurs. In an unhealthy and rather naïve endorsement of sex within marriage, Stenzel claims that all of the problems attendant with sex before marriage magically disappear within the confines of a marital relationship:

...[When] a married couple has sex – whether it’s the first time or the tenth time or the hundredth time – there’s nothing to worry about or be afraid of. No one will walk in on you (except maybe your own kids if you’ve been married long enough to have kids and if you forgot to lock the bedroom door). Your partner won’t compare you to anyone else because there won’t have *been* anyone else.

If it hurts or doesn’t go perfectly the first time, who cares? The other person isn’t going to dump you and find another boyfriend or girlfriend. You get to work together to create a phenomenal, exciting, satisfying sexual relationship without fear of failure.⁹⁰

However, the divorce and abandonment rates indicate that matrimony is no guarantee of a lifetime of happiness. Unfortunately, marital rape is a real phenomenon, and marriage is no guarantee of fidelity, equality, or love. It seems that the focus in messages like Stenzel’s is on a shallow discussion of abstinence versus sex – the assumption being that any premarital sex is irresponsible and will result in heartache or worse – rather than on the ethics of sex and sexuality, within or before marriage. The problems attendant with premarital sex that Stenzel and Washington mention seem to be either related to shame regarding the transgression of a particular morality and metanarrative or with the transgression of one or both partners of an

⁸⁹ Ibid., 87.

⁹⁰ Pam Stenzel, *Sex Has a Price Tag*, 82.

ethics of sex that includes mutuality, commitment, and sincere self-giving love as opposed to selfishly using one another as a commodity. By ignoring the ethics of sex, discussions such as this not only perpetuate a focus on form over content in relationships but also discount the possibility that unwed mothers had in fact engaged in sexual relationships marked by the sort of ideal ethics and regard for others that is desirable and yet lacking from many premarital and marital relationships. Instead, the single mother is simply labeled a sinner or a victim.

Perhaps most often, though, conversations in evangelical Christian circles speak of the consequences of premarital sex as a danger to one's relationship with God and to the church community's witness to the world. In these messages, abstinence is said to be the godly choice, the practice that aligns with God's will and that which shows our submission to a divine plan that we may not understand or even desire. Sex before marriage is spoken of as a sin, a mistake, rebellion, or evidence of a naivety or ignorance about Christian morality often typical of nonbelievers and worldly, secular persons. For example, in a popular article from *Relevant*, a hip magazine geared towards young-adult evangelicals, author Tyler Charles writes that pretending that Christians practice premarital abstinence is simply not realistic, but that our strategies for lowering the percentage of young-adult Christians participating in premarital sex need to evolve. He quotes North Park University professor Scot McKnight as arguing for a revaluing of marriage that may encourage Christians to marry younger, thus providing a safe outlet for sexual drives in the marriage context. According to McKnight, "[Young-adult abstinence] is absolutely not realistic. But it's also not realistic not to do a lot of things, and that doesn't mean the Bible doesn't tell us the ideal and design of God is not to have premarital sex."⁹¹ Thus, according to

⁹¹ Tyler Charles, "The Secret Sexual Revolution," *Relevant*, February 20, 2012, accessed February 22, 2016, <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/life/relationship/features/28337-the-secret-sexual-revolution> (accessed February 22).

this argument, abstinence before marriage is God’s will, and the premarital sex that produces unmarried pregnancy is therefore a violation of this will – albeit, according to the sympathetic tone of the article, a somewhat understandable one. Charles concludes his article with a statement from Joanna Hyatt, director of a Los Angeles-based sexual and relational health education program called Reality Check, in which Hyatt states that “if we’re serious about people growing in their faith, we have to help them see [that] this issue [of premarital sex] will stand in the way of their relationship with God, but it doesn’t have to keep them from God.”⁹² Likewise, in “‘Safe Sex’ Is the Slam-Dunk of the Devil,” John Piper calls “fornication” an “especially destructive sin” that God commands us to flee because God knows what is good and bad for us. He concludes his article with an exhortation to “choose chastity and life,” equating abstinence with life and, by implication, premarital sex with death.⁹³

These messages concerning sexuality oftentimes behave as metanarratives in that they disallow the possibility or value of alternatives, differences, dissent, or questioning. Instead, they present a singular, monolithic message concerning appropriate Christian morality. For example, the metanarrative will usually speak of abstinence as the only course that is obedient to God’s will; thus, all other options are sinful. Information about alternatives, which are deemed “sinful”, is limited under the explanation that righteous Christians ought not to entertain wickedness, for knowledge about “sin” leads to temptation. Furthermore, to question the rationale behind this or to express discontent with the explanation that this is simply God’s will and that God knows what is best for humans is oftentimes treated as disobedient, rebellious, and unfaithful. At a 2013 event hosted by the Women’s and Gender Studies Program at Southern Methodist University,

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ John Piper, “‘Safe Sex’ Is the Slam-Dunk of the Devil,” *Desiring God*, accessed January 21, 2016, www.desiringgod.org/articles/safe-sex-is-the-slam-dunk-of-the-devil

Christian feminist activist Shelby Knox spoke about her experiences growing up in an evangelical community that controlled most of the local governmental and educational decisions and practices in her hometown of Lubbock, Texas. The subject of the documentary *The Education of Shelby Knox* (2005), Knox became infamous for her participation as a high-school student in a movement to provide comprehensive sex education in public high schools, challenging the abstinence-only education in place. According to Knox, the sex education Lubbock students received consisted of a local pastor (known as “Sex Ed”) giving one presentation to freshmen and another to juniors and seniors the night before their Prom. “Sex Ed” was known to use an analogy in which he likened those who have sex before marriage to a dirty toothbrush that no one would want to use. Knox was persuaded to take part in the efforts to institute comprehensive sex education courses at her school when a friend from her church became pregnant at fifteen and was kicked out of her home. This friend reportedly told Knox with fear and confusion that she was unaware that she could become pregnant from her first sexual encounter.⁹⁴

In *The Education of Shelby Knox*, Knox herself takes a virginity pledge at her church under the leadership of Sex Ed, yet is later confronted by this same pastor, despite her personal commitment to abstinence, for her choices to “dabble with the worldly” by supporting comprehensive sex education. In this example, we see in the operation of this metanarrative an eclipsing of any possibilities for godly relationships and sexuality apart from abstinence before

⁹⁴ Shelby Knox, “An Evening with Shelby Knox” (lecture, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, October 29, 2013).

marriage. Furthermore, apparent in these accounts is an anxiety about providing information and knowledge regarding health, sexuality, and differences of belief.⁹⁵

Interestingly, Christian abstinence campaigns may actually be counterproductive, according to the results of recent studies. In a 2009 issue of *Johns Hopkins Public Health* magazine, Lisa DeNike reports the results of a nationwide study of religious teens who took virginity pledges and religious teens who did not. According to the study, pledgers were just as likely to have premarital sex and far less likely to use protection as nonpledgers. Furthermore, the study found that more than 90% of funding for abstinence education does not require curricula to be scientifically accurate, and in 2004, eleven out of thirteen federally-funded abstinence programs contained incorrect information. And yet, funding for abstinence-only education increased from \$73 million in 2001 to \$204 million in 2008, such is the anxiety about premarital sex.⁹⁶

Reflecting on these figures, Frank Schaeffer powerfully contends that when premarital sex is equated with sin, young evangelicals are far less likely to prepare themselves with contraception because, while premarital sex is sinful, preparing to sin by equipping oneself with contraceptives is far more egregious. As he writes, the entire abstinence-only movement relies upon a narrative of honor (for virgins) and shame (for non-virgins), the latter never quite eradicated but certainly forgiven in an unequal relationship involving undeserved grace from a broken-hearted but loving God and the receiving of this grace and restoration from an equally broken-hearted but disempowered human. One significant problem with this is that the recipient

⁹⁵ *The Education of Shelby Knox*, directed by Marion Lipschutz and Rose Rosenblatt, (Lubbock, TX, 2005), documentary film.

⁹⁶ Lisa DeNike, "Virginity Pledges Can Mean Less Protection," *Johns Hopkins Public Health*, Summer 2009, magazine.jhsph.edu/2009/summer/news_briefs/virginity_pledges_can_mean_less_protection/

of grace is forever characterized by their loss of virginity before marriage; that is, they are told that redemption and restoration is only found in their willingness to continually share the story of their sexual indiscretion, repentance, and undeserved forgiveness:

...[when] young people fail to keep their pledges, they feel the full weight of evangelical guilt on their shoulders and thus, far from being driven from the movement, are driven to their knees to confess within their home churches and remain part of the evangelical community, wherein the glue that binds them to that community is the guilt of their own failure.⁹⁷

Thus, for evangelicals raised to believe that sex outside of marriage is a dire sin, damaging to their relationship with God and their Christian community, the transgression of this rule produces a sense of alienation from those who continue to adhere to the rule of virginity, from their pastors, and from their families and churches, as well as a sense of alienation from the ideal self they intended to be and, most detrimentally, from the God whom they love. The only antidote to this sin is to acknowledge publicly the problem and receive the unmerited mercy of the community and of God, then, in evangelical fashion, share this story with others. Even for those who do not become public evangelists of their own sexual transgressions, the inclusion into the “honored community” and, allegedly, into God’s grace is forever a story of sexual sin, resulting shame, and unwarranted forgiveness.

The argumentation utilized by Christians to justify the propriety of sex within the marriage context and the unacceptability of premarital sex – even between two committed, non-promiscuous individuals – often tends to beg the question. Such is the case of the tactics used in Stenzel’s *Sex Has a Price Tag*:

There are probably a million reasons why God made marriage the dividing line between those who should have sex and those who shouldn’t. I’m going to give you two. First, sex is best in the context of marriage. God’s guideline gives you the best.

⁹⁷ Frank Schaeffer, “‘Abstinence Only’ Exposed as Subversive of Actual Evangelical Values,” *The Huffington Post*, August 3, 2012, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/abstinence-only-exposed-a_b_1737130.

And second, God's boundary provides the best and protects from the worst.

Clearly, God's way is best. There can be no more blurring of the separating line. It is marriage.⁹⁸

In this case, Stenzel has basically told her readers that God says sex should be reserved for marriage because this is what is best, and this is what is best because God knows what is best. There is no questioning of *why* this is best – beyond equating all of God's decrees with what is best. Neither is there ever really a direct mention of where in the Christian Scriptures God declares that premarital sex is what all biblical statements regarding “sexual immorality” refer to; instead, this is just taken for granted to be the case by many modern-day evangelical Christians.

This may seem to be simply an example of circular reasoning and begging the question when it comes to argumentation regarding a particular type of Christian sexual morality, but this common method of reasoning belies a theological problem with tangible consequences for how we conceive of and respond to authority. What Stenzel's rationale implies is that God is beyond human comprehension and that to question why God would command something is to impudently challenge God's authority. Anna Broadway, author of “True Love Obeys: Why We Abstain from Premarital Sex,” contends that we ought not to remain abstinent before marriage because God will then reward us with a spouse or with better, safer sex or relationships but simply because God is God. According to Broadway, obedience is our act of faith and submission to divine authority. In such a way, Broadway too leaves intact a regard for authority – earthly or divine – that views questions as inappropriate, dangerous, and rebellious and paints a picture of God as “wholly other” from humans and therefore beyond our comprehension and logic.

When authority – even divine authority – is perceived as beyond questioning, and the

⁹⁸ Pam Stenzel, *Sex Has a Price Tag*, 25.

logic of the authority figure (even when this figure is God) is thought to be entirely opposite from human logic, this creates a situation in which our own rationality becomes stifled and blind obedience becomes the celebrated and encouraged mode of living. An important example of the articulation of this theology comes from the influential work of John Calvin in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In Book I, Calvin declares that the Bible states that God ordains all things, and, because God is sovereign, omnipotent, and good in all ways, God's will is the "just cause of all things." Therefore, we ought not to question or challenge God's plans, since these plans are secret and, in their holy wisdom, beyond the fallen human mind to understand.⁹⁹

As we have seen throughout history, human authority and hegemony has been legitimated by appealing to divine authority. For example, slavery, white supremacy, Manifest Destiny, patriarchy, colonialism, terrorism, and late market capitalism have all been supported with appeals to religious authority, citing divine sanction for these systems. We may scoff at the inhumaneness and illogic of judging another person as less than human based on their anatomy or the color of their skin, but when part of the fundamental theological message in the metanarrative is that God's will cannot make sense to our finite, sinful human minds – that God's reasons are beyond our grasp and are holy, even if they appear to us evil, I believe it becomes understandable why humans have historically been able to justify all sorts of evils and injustices through appeal to divine authority. In this case, this appeal to God's wisdom and will operating according to a different, higher reason than corrupt human rationality justifies without actually explaining in a logically satisfying way the patriarchal headship of men, the notion of essential differences between men and women and thus gendered spheres, and the judging as sinful any person who exercises that exercises their sexuality outside of a heterosexual marriage.

⁹⁹ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book I*, eds. Tony Lane and Hilary Osborne, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1987), 21-83.

This ordering of life must be obeyed without challenge or questioning, and any struggles faced by those who transgress these apparent axioms are chalked up to natural consequences of their transgressions that thus demonstrate the rightfulness of the axioms and systems. Nowhere is the system that metes out these struggles questioned, nor are alternative interpretations of God's will for human relationality entertained.

Interestingly, though, while some Christians seem to indicate that premarital sex has negative repercussions for the entire church community, this alleged sin does not appear to be regarded as dire an "infection" as non-nuclear families. Instead, most of the literature I have reviewed for this study has focused on a sort of privatized effect, limited in scope to the individuals or the couple as a unit and at times extending to the family of the couple engaging in premarital sex. Ironically, though, evangelical Christian literature and arguments maintain that sex and marriage are communal events, that what makes sex within marriage acceptable and sex outside of marriage sinful is the element of communal sanctioning and celebrating of the relationship by a Christian community. By implication, one can reason that a failure to exercise sex within these acceptable bounds would thus have implications for the Church as a whole, thus risking the holiness of the Christian church community, but this argument is rarely explicitly made. However, some scholars and ministers within evangelical Christianity are making that connection and are proclaiming premarital sex a sin against the entire Church. For example, Lauren F. Winner, Assistant Professor of Christian Spirituality at Duke Divinity School, defines chastity in her article "Sex in the Body of Christ" as "doing sex in the body of Christ – doing sex in a way that befits the body of Christ, and that keeps you grounded, and bounded, in the community." She writes that in baptism, Christians are joined to Christ's body, so Christ's body must give that individual permission to join with another human being in sex not just that

individual's body but the entire body of Christ to which he or she is connected. This official permission is granted in the wedding; any sexual activity between non-marital couples is an offense against the body of Christ. According to Winner, the holy and obedient formula is "[abstinence] before marriage and fidelity within marriage; any other kind of sex is embodied apostasy."¹⁰⁰ In a later interview, Winner actually addresses the notion that sex is a private matter and thus has private repercussions, stating, "For Christians, seemingly private matters are communal. Sex is just one area where Christians need to open our lives to our communities."¹⁰¹ While Winner is in the minority of Christians who openly maintain that premarital sex is an act of disobedience and unfaithfulness committed against the entire Christian church, she does not speak to what specifically these repercussions for the community are. We are only left with the notion that premarital sex is an act that produces communal shame and harm.

Yet, most Christians who speak about premarital pregnancy and the sin of unwed sex that produces this tend to emphasize the pain and spiritual brokenness that this act causes in the two sexual partners and in their nuclear families of origin, rather than on the repercussions of premarital sex for the Christian community at large. Therefore, we can see a discrepancy in the anxiety about the impact on the sanctity of the Christian Church caused by the growing numbers of alternative family structures like single mothers and the relative silence about the communal repercussions of premarital sex. One possible variable is the absence of a male in the single-mother families and the possible – even potential – presence of a male in premarital sex. In the former case, leadership of a family solely by a female, sans a male marital partner, is deemed a

¹⁰⁰ Lauren F. Winner, "Sex in the Body of Christ: Chastity Is a Spiritual Discipline for the Whole Church," *Christianity Today*, May 13, 2005, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/may/34.28.html>

¹⁰¹ "Interview with Lauren F. Winner," Christianbook.com, accessed February 19, 2016, http://www.christianbook.com/Christian/Books/cms_content?page=938185

spiritual threat to the Church, whereas heterosexual premarital sex involves a male and female partner who, should they conceive, might be convinced to marry and become a male-headed nuclear family. As New York Times best-selling author Frank Schaeffer insightfully reflects, in what he calls the “fairytale narrative” in evangelical abstinence programs, Christian chastity is “sold as the guarantor of good marriages and marriage as the purpose of relationships.”¹⁰² Thus, if the ideal in this metanarrative is marriage, then couples who engage in premarital sex might still be redeemed through matrimony due to the continued presence of the male, whereas a single mother’s fate is sealed – at least temporarily, until another male comes into her life.

While ample sources speak to the alleged danger to society caused by unplanned pregnancies to unmarried women, few speak directly to the communal impact of premarital sex. Instead, the focus in many abstinence campaigns is on the individual and privatized spiritual repercussions rather than on the effects of this alleged sin for the whole community. Schaeffer speaks to this trend, noting that Christian abstinence campaigns such as True Love Waits and the Silver Ring Thing hinge upon the notion of the autonomous self and individualistic society, emphasizing virginity as a personal choice that is made possible only by an equally personal commitment to Jesus Christ.¹⁰³ Failure to live up to this pledge, then, has significant and dire repercussions for the individual, but none that cannot be forgiven through personal repentance; some evangelicals even offer what they call “secondary virginity” to those who have had premarital sex but repented of this sin and desire to receive back their “spiritual virginity”. Single motherhood – actually birthing a child conceived through premarital sex and raising it without a male spouse – produces the same individual spiritual repercussions but also create harm to the

¹⁰² Frank Schaeffer, “‘Abstinence Only’ Exposed as Subversive of Actual Evangelical Values.”

¹⁰³ Ibid.

wider community, according to the metanarrative, and no hope is given for the expunging of these consequences, save marriage. Implicitly, then, the greater sin or threat is not the premarital sex that caused the pregnancy but the pregnancy itself and the rearing of a child by an unmarried mother.

In addition to the impact on the health of one's family and future relationships, on the relationship between the human participants and God, and on the Christian Church's holiness, premarital sex is considered to be a threat to the sanctity and health of our society and nation, according to the metanarrative on sexuality and family operative in many American evangelical circles. This notion renders unmarried mothers a pariah or sort of forewarning of the deconstruction of morality in our contemporary society, and tolerance of the actions that produce unmarried mothers – or worse, advocacy for policy changes that support the thriving of unmarried mothers – might be considered selling out to the pressures of sinful secular culture. In evangelical Christianity in the United States, a current battle rages over how to teach abstinence to youth. An oft-cited recent study revealed that approximately 80% of unmarried, self-identifying evangelical Christians between the ages of 18 and 29 have had sex, and two-thirds have been sexually active in the past year.¹⁰⁴ Yet this does not necessarily signal that Christian

¹⁰⁴ Interestingly, the most commonly cited "source" for this statistic is a 2011 article in *Relevant* magazine that refers to a December 2009 study by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. However, hyperlinks to this study have since been disabled, and the only accessible study by The National Campaign on similar issues, also published in December 2009, does not specifically reference the percentage of unmarried evangelical young adults who have had sex. To further muddy these waters, a second study by Rachel K. Jones and Joerg Dreweke of The Guttmacher Institute in April, 2011, says that 75% of unmarried evangelical young women have had sex. Finally, a third study, published by Grey Matter Research Consulting in February, 2012, and entitled "Evangelical Millennials Say Sex Outside of Marriage Is Wrong, But Behavior Does Not Always Match Beliefs," says that 44% of unmarried evangelicals between 18 and 29 years old have had sex.

While the studies do not necessarily reveal a consensus regarding the percentage of evangelical Christians having premarital sex, and while not all of the popularly-quoted studies are currently available for review, what is important to note is how the public has regarded these studies and which of these studies the general and Christian publics have considered to be authoritative. Significantly, the statistic that holds that 80% of evangelical Christians have had premarital sex is the most cited figure in Christian literature in the past five years.

attitudes about sexuality are changing; according to the same survey, 76% of evangelical Christians still believe that premarital sex is morally wrong.¹⁰⁵ In response to this, many evangelical Christians and organizations are concluding that abstinence-only campaigns are simply not effective or realistic and that they ought to also be providing information about contraception – while still preaching abstinence until marriage. Others contend that comprehensive sex education undermines abstinence by assuming that young people cannot or will not wait until marriage to have sex, thus lowering the standards to which we hold our Christian young adults. For example, co-founder of the Southern Baptist Convention and LifeWay Christian Resources’ “True Love Waits” movement Jimmy Hester insists that “[any] discussion of contraception weakens the abstinence message.”¹⁰⁶ Additionally, programs alleviating the struggles of single mothers or that go beyond focusing on the “spiritual restoration” of single mothers to actual empowerment of them are seen as pandering to a sinful secular culture that tolerates or even celebrates non-traditional family structures and sex outside of marriage. In other words, if we reduce the impact of sex before marriage, we will be no different from the secular culture of sin, leading to the moral demise of our society, in which the Church is an often-lonely beacon of morality and hope.

One of the major donors of a controversial multimillion-dollar grant to the National Association of Evangelicals for more comprehensive, creative, and effective sex education and

Tyler Charles, “(Almost) Everyone’s Doing It,” *Relevant Magazine*, Issue 53, Sept/Oct 2011. <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/life/relationships/almost-everyones-doing-it>

¹⁰⁵ “Evangelical Millennials Say Sex Outside of Marriage Is Wrong, But Behavior Does Not Always Match Beliefs,” Grey Matter Research Consulting, December 3, 2012. http://greymatterresearch.com/index.files/Millennials_2.htm.

¹⁰⁶ Adelle M. Banks, “With High Premarital Sex and Abortion Rates, Evangelicals Say It’s Time to Talk About Sex,” *The Huffington Post*, April, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/23/evangelicals-sex-frank-talk_n_1443062.html

abstinence campaigns is an organization called The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. According to The National Campaign, teen pregnancy has actually been on a dramatic decline over the past fifteen years, yet pregnancy amongst unmarried young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 have been on the rise. In fact, most births to single mothers are to women within this age bracket. These women are presumably more mature than teenage girls, possibly have more education under their belts, and may be better situated financially than a teenage mother. And yet, they are the current cause of much anxiety in evangelical Christian circles – and in this campaign itself. The anxiety is not surrounding the unprepared nature or youth of the mother but rather around the impropriety of parenting outside of the bounds of a heterosexual marriage. The National Campaign’s website states that nearly 70% of all pregnancies amongst women ages 20 to 29 are unplanned, and these carry with them “a broad array of socioeconomic and health risks to women and men, to children, and to the larger community.”¹⁰⁷ However, the data they feature most prominently on their website that tabulates the economic costs to the community only account for teen pregnancy – not for pregnancies amongst young adults. Still, though, the message of The National Campaign is clearly meant to convey that any unplanned pregnancy damages the community and nation.

One of the reasons for this anxiety is the tie between unplanned pregnancy and abortion. Studies show that 30% of evangelical Christians have had an abortion, even if they oppose abortion in theory and on principle. Some evangelical Christians recognize that many of these women choose abortion because the shame they may incur from other Christians, from their families, and from their churches may be excruciating. Others see the connection between a

¹⁰⁷ The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, “Unplanned Pregnancy,” accessed February 22, 2016, <http://thenationalcampaign.org/why-it-matters/unplanned-pregnancy>

social and economic system stacked against single mothers and abortion rates. Annika Smith, the director of the National Association of Evangelical's Generation Forum, a program designed to reduce the number of abortions amongst Christians, urges churches to become safe spaces for honest discussion about sex, free from shame or condemnation, so that unmarried women who find themselves expecting feel supported in their motherhood rather than ostracized and judged. Other evangelicals are pushing for churches to alleviate the financial burdens that fall upon the shoulders of single mothers.¹⁰⁸ However, systemic pressures pertaining to socioeconomics contribute to the rate of abortions, and evangelical churches are responsible for creating impossible situations of shame and disempowerment for unmarried pregnant women by idealizing virginity over the selfless self-giving that can be found in relationships of all types – including premarital ones and ones between a single mother and her child. Some groups are beginning to recognize this. According to a 2010 article in *The Christian Post*, the National Association of Evangelicals launched an initiative to encourage talk about “respecting sex” in Christian churches as a means of reducing abortion rates nationally. This campaign is based on the theory that a lack of respect for God's life-affirming purposes for sex – namely, that two people become “one flesh” with a commitment to nurture one another's life and to produce life with one another – within the bounds of a marriage relationship produce attitudes that fail to affirm life in other situations, such as pregnancy.¹⁰⁹

Yet female-focused, shaming narratives abound. Giving credence to the notion that women who engage in premarital sex are lacking in their relationship with God and are

¹⁰⁸Adelle M. Banks, “With High Premarital Sex and Abortion Rates, Evangelicals Say It's Time to Talk About Sex.”

¹⁰⁹ Michelle A. Vu, “Evangelicals: Let's Talk About Sex to Reduce Abortions,” *The Christian Post*, May 2010, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/evangelicalslets-talk-about-sex-to-reduce-abortion-45253/>

contributing to the moral decline of the United States, popular Southern Baptist leader Russell D. Moore writes in his article “Sexual Iconoclasm” that evangelicals who engage in premarital sex have fallen victim to society’s “softening” of the seriousness of the act, epitomized in the replacement of the term “fornication” with “premarital sex.” According to Moore, Christians are guilty of creating more selfish individualism in American culture by urging youth to remain abstinent before marriage in order to improve their relationships with God, to avoid health risks and damage to future families, or to remain consistent with their values. This, insists Moore, is the language of selfishness that produces moral decline in the United States, exemplified by the number of Christians engaging in premarital sex and having abortions, selfish and blasphemous acts. Instead, Moore urges a return to more severe language, claiming that, quite simply, “fornicators will not inherit the kingdom of God.”¹¹⁰

Thus, the language of one of the most prominent evangelical metanarratives in the Global North concerning morality both explicitly and implicitly censures single mothers as dangerous to the well-being of their own families and children, both a perpetrator and a victim of spiritual brokenness in their relationships with both God and the Church, risks to the sanctity of the Church community, and even emblematic of the moral decline of society and the United States. Explicitly, single mothers are contrasted with the ideal of the nuclear family structure. Interestingly, while this two-parent formula is often clothed in patriarchal language of male headship, in more moderate and modern evangelical forms, the family ideal has been touted as liberating to women and amenable to their self-actualization and work in or outside the home. Whether they argue for egalitarian gender roles or complementarian ones, even these arguments implicitly place the male spouse in a salvific and powerful role in that marriage remains a mark

¹¹⁰ Russell D. Moore, “Sexual Iconoclasm,” *Touchstone*, Jan/Feb 2013, <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=26-01-020-v>

of redemption. Furthermore, few of the messages that encourage women's self-actualization and equality with men in the family also take up the injustice of the wage gap, second shift of domestic work and child care, and other disproportionate burdens borne by women – and, to a greater degree, single mothers. Finally, as long as the two-parent family ideal is held up as the paragon of virtue, single mothers – and all other alternative family structures – will be marginalized as lesser and deviant.

In addition to the problematic mystification of the male-headed two-parent family as God's ideal social unit, the metanarrative also involves the revering of sexuality expressed within this two-parent marital relationship and the demonizing of any sexual activity outside of this boundary. This of course means that single mothers who have never been married incur the stigma of transgressing this morality. Importantly, the shame incurred from one's spiritual community, which supposedly represents an earthly manifestation of the divine, is quite damning and alienating.

By creating a metanarrative wherein the holiness and success of both the Christian Church and the United States hinge upon unquestioning obedience to particular restrictive morality codes as expressions of faith, many evangelical circles have created a culture in which single motherhood becomes an overt sign of apostasy, reprobation, and rebellion, and abortion becomes a viable path to safety from this stigma. Furthermore, in this culture, the material struggles of unmarried mothers act as “natural consequences” of sin for which the single mother must accept responsibility rather than fight, while her spiritual welfare and restoration becomes the site of ecclesial care and involvement. By welcoming the single mother's repentance and subsequently restoring her, the Christian Church is able to leave intact the metanarrative of the impropriety of all premarital sex and eschew responsibility for both abortion rates amongst

evangelicals (after all, they offer compassion and grace for the penitent!) and the support of economic and political practices that marginalize unmarried mothers.

However, within evangelical Christianity, there is a surplus signification, a wealth of meanings, marginalized interpretations, and silenced stories that, when brought to light, can be utilized to construct a metanarrative to not only point a way forward to an alternative sexual ethic but also to the empowerment of single mothers that pushes beyond mere compassion for this demographic. Evangelical Christians are adopting attitudes, embracing theologies and philosophies, and taking actions that can prove a basis for liberation for single mothers. What is missing, though, is a consciousness of the collusion of some forms of Christianity (and these forms' attendant family, sexual, and gendered ethics) with seemingly non-Christian economic, social, and political ethics that are designed to keep certain gendered, ethnic, national, and class-based hegemony in place and sequester power within a select group of people who benefit from patriarchy. In the next chapter, I will discuss the historical development of the notion of the nuclear family alongside other family models, thus deconstructing the mystification and supposed universality of this one form of family, and introducing to the conversation alternative family and social structures.

CHAPTER 3: THE MAKING OF A METANARRATIVE: HOW THE “NUCLEAR FAMILY” AND NEOLIBERALISM MET AND MARRIED

The advocacy of the traditional nuclear family, comprised of mother, father, and children, capitalizes on the paranoia fostered by the “national security complex” of our day. In his book *Earth Into Property: Colonization, Decolonization, and Capitalism*, Anthony J. Hall writes that the United States furthers its cultural and economic interests both domestically and internationally by taking on this complex. Arising from U.S. involvement in World War I in 1917 and gaining momentum with the Cold War, contends Hall, the United States has employed a language of demonization of anything that differs from the norms established by American elites. Thus, any deviance or alternative to the metanarrative is deemed a threat to the “sanctity, purity, and status” of the United States.¹¹¹ In this national security complex, a metanarrative concerning family structures and women’s appropriate roles and relationships, which certainly began to take form centuries earlier, has, in the past century, developed in such a way that the nuclear family becomes the primary, if not sole, arbiter of morality and truth and serves as the protector of children from contamination by the evils of the world.

This era gave rise to the concept of “family values,” predicated upon the nuclear family structure. According to sociologists Natalia Sarkisian and Naomi Gerstel, “family values” are

¹¹¹ Anthony J. Hall, *Earth Into Property: Colonization, Decolonization, and Capitalism*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010), 267.

commonly regarded as beliefs (both social and political) that consider the nuclear family to be “the essential ethical and moral unity of society.”¹¹² Any deviation from this structure disrupts the only formula that can produce good, productive Christian citizens. By sacralizing the nuclear family structure and linking it with the idea of blessedness (particularly in terms of security and material prosperity), this metanarrative produces in our culture a desire to imitate this structure and to denigrate alternative images of family.

This concept of family is not a biological, natural given, nor does it accurately describe the way that most humans organize themselves socially. As Sarkisian and Gerstel note, a 2010 survey indicates that Americans’ definitions of family are becoming more expansive and inclusive, and in an earlier poll in 1995, only two percent of women and one percent of men defined family values as relating to the nuclear family structure. Rather, this poll revealed that 52 percent of women and 42 percent of men considered family values to mean “loving, taking care of, and supporting each other.”¹¹³ Instead, the concept of the nuclear family at the center of family values and its link to morality has developed over time in close conjunction with other political, theological, economic, and social trends, and the role of women in this arrangement also fluctuates according to a number of contextual factors.

By analyzing the development of the nuclear family structure in Western cultures and the changing expectations of women in culture and theology, we may ascertain the constructed nature of the metanarrative of the singular propriety of the nuclear family structure – and its genealogical tie to the emergence of neoliberalism. In neoliberalism today, power is consolidated in an elite class who owns the means of production, controls economic decisions,

¹¹² Natalia Sarkisian and Naomi Gerstel, *Nuclear Family Values, Extended Family Lives; The Power of Race, Class, and Gender*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1-2.

¹¹³ Ibid., 2.

and authorizes social norms and roles, so that those who deviate from these roles, such as single mothers, are constructed as the “abject” who deserve their struggles and disempowerment. In uncovering its historical construction and the neoliberal agenda and benefit of the patriarchal nuclear family ideal and attendant vilification of single motherhood, we are then forced to question its purported tie to Christian morality and may have grounds to deconstruct the organization of prevailing teachings in evangelical Christianity in the southern United States that prop up the alienation and exclusion of single mothers from resources necessary for their holistic thriving. In this section, I will trace the historical and anthropological development of “the family” as it relates to this nuclear structure, demonstrating that this model has taken shape in relation to a number of factors that honor a select portion of human society. Furthermore, I will discuss several key developments in theology, history, and culture that have influenced the rise of the nuclear family structure as an innately moral, socially appropriate, and Christian organization – and that indicate the constructed nature of this particular organization. My aim will be to expose how the rise of the nuclear family is intertwined with neoliberal privatization in a class system shaped by patriarchal values and norms and how single mothers pose a threat to this system. I argue that “family values”, the belief that the nuclear family is the essential moral unit of society,¹¹⁴ rely upon a culture of privatization and a theology of economic and gender roles that not only are oppressive to female heads of household but also distance most people from power in our society and render Christianity a personal spiritual pursuit rather than a potent tool for challenging hegemony.

¹¹⁴ Natalia Sarkisian and Naomi Gerstel, *Nuclear Family Values, Extended Family Lives*.

Pre-Capitalist Societies

Just a decade ago, prominent pastor John Piper and the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood issued the Danvers Statement, an influential treatise for evangelical communities that fused “family values” with the male-headed, two-parent nuclear family form and warned that “feminist egalitarianism will lead to increasingly destructive consequences in our families, our churches, and the culture at large.”¹¹⁵ In popular forms of American Christianity such as those represented by Piper and in market capitalism, individualism becomes tantamount to the moral and common good. As Joerg Rieger maintains, individualism is, in fact, one of the most important points of connection between religion and economics.¹¹⁶ Christian metanarratives that focus on the individual often center personal purity and piety and the nuclear family as cornerstones of holiness, and economic prosperity is often depicted as an opportunity open to those with the self-discipline and ambition to achieve it. Thus, single mothers’ economic and social struggles are popularly construed as natural consequences of their deviance. Yet I argue that this spirit of privatization, a spawn of individualism, has influenced prominent Christian ideologies and culture to venerate the nuclear family, neglect community responsibility, vilify alternative family structures, and ignore empowering theologies for women and single mothers. The result is an alienated demographic in our society that, no matter the work ethic, selflessness, or faith they may demonstrate, are unsupported and demonized. However, while others actually prosper from single mothers’ oppression, most of us, in truth, have more in common with these women than with the elite class, for the same narratives and systems that oppress them locate the majority outside of the power center as well. In this section, I will explore how the rise of

¹¹⁵ The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, “The Danvers Statement.”

¹¹⁶ Joerg Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 20.

“family values”, a popular topic in both churches and congressional halls, and the vilification of single mothers aid a neoliberal power agenda.

The nuclear family is a fairly recent development, and as social organization has changed over history, gender norms and roles have varied as well. Human beings have organized themselves in myriad ways in their care of children and have had wildly diverse concepts of gender and the roles of women and men in family and society. In terms of social organization, many indigenous groups traced kinship solely through women, which afforded females a large amount of power in these cultures. The Cherokee people of the United States are one example of such a matrilineal culture. According to Theda Perdue, Professor of History at the University of North Carolina, the Cherokees organized themselves into multigenerational households that had the appearance to European settlers of ““a little village””, based on relations to the females in the clan.¹¹⁷ In these “villages,” women were the only permanent residents, and husbands were outsiders who were absorbed into the households of the women to whom they were married or related. In fact, women were permitted to dismiss their husbands in divorce, at which time, the male was forced to return to his mother’s or sister’s household.¹¹⁸ Economically, women also had a large measure of power, since the “primary landholding unit in Cherokee society was the household,” according to Perdue.¹¹⁹ In this society, women in the kinship network collectively controlled and cultivated the land and were thus in control of the food supply and distribution of crops. This communal sense of responsibility or ownership extended to Cherokee notions of childrearing and what modern Western society would consider family. Motherhood, writes

¹¹⁷ Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 42-43.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 44.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 24.

Perdue, was a social role rather than a biological one, so children had many “mothers” who were in actuality aunts and other female relatives connected to their biological mothers.¹²⁰ The Cherokee people were not exceptional, either, in their social organization; rather, numerous societies on each continent have evidenced communal-based economic practices and property ownership, childrearing, and familial relations, as well as non-patriarchal power distributions and non-“traditional” gender roles. As in this Cherokee society, in societies where women controlled or contributed heavily to the food supply, and where this food supply was an important staple in either the economy or the well-being of the community, women generally held greater power.

Cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead was amongst the most notable scholars of gender in the first half of the 20th century, studying gender roles and relations in Papua New Guinea and Bali. After conducting in-depth studies of different people groups in Papua New Guinea in the 1930s and 1940s, Mead found that in one group, women tended to be dominant and impersonal, whereas the men were more codependent and emotional. In another group, both men and women tended to be aggressive and power-seeking, and in a third group, the men and women appeared more cooperative with one another and gentle. Not only did her study disrupt the notion of universal essences of genders and sexes, but it also indicated that gender is culturally constructed rather than biologically determined.¹²¹

University of Southern California Professor of Anthropology Walter L. Williams records similar findings in his article “The Two-Spirit People of Indigenous North Americans.” In this piece, he writes that amongst native peoples of North America, Siberia, and Central and Southeast Asia, the concepts of gender and gender roles differ drastically from the binary gender

¹²⁰ Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835*, 46-47.

¹²¹ Margaret Mead, *Male and Female*, 3rd ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

system that predominates today in many Western cultures and that dictates the propriety of family structures in many American evangelical groups. Williams speaks of “feminine males” who were often married to masculine males and masculine females who often had feminine women as wives. Such people were viewed as “doubly blessed” to have the spirits of a man and woman, thus holding the ability to do the work of both men and women. They were often regarded as religious and economic leaders and teachers.¹²²

Furthermore, in traditional African communities, the family forms the center of society and the primary transmitter of culture and religion, but the “nuclear family” does not necessarily exist in the form common to Western society. Very rarely do households consist of one mother, one father, and their children; instead, the household is comprised of what Euro-Americans might call the “nuclear family,” along with the extended family, household help, and any non-relatives who are under the care of the mother of the household. In some communities, polygamy is still practiced, and elsewhere, as with the Ga people of Southeastern Ghana, the husband and wife live in separate quarters, with the children residing with their mother until the males reach adolescence.¹²³ The woman as mother in matrilineal cultures plays a vital and coveted role as the link between the ancestors and her family, and even her society, ensuring progeny for her community and kin. According to Vishanthie Sewpaul, marriages are thought to occur not between individuals but between clans, and the term for children in Bantu, for

¹²² Walter L. Williams, “The Two-Spirit People of Indigenous North Americans,” *The Guardian*, October 11, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/oct/11/two-spirit-people-north-america>

¹²³ Rose Teteki Abbey, “Rediscovering Ataa Naa Nyonmo – The Father Mother God,” in *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women*, ed. Nyambura J. Njoroge and Musa W. Dube (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster, 2001), 148.

example, is “generations,” indicating that the woman “does not produce just a child but a generation that ensures the propagation of the species.”¹²⁴

In other areas of Africa in precolonial times, age, lineage, and general seniority rather than gender were used as organizers for the distribution of power and wealth in a society. The Yoruba of Nigeria were, during this era, “genderless” people who based their hierarchies upon seniority in kinship systems. For example, when one individual (typically of the female sex) married into the family of another (typically of the male sex), the “newcomer” was ranked below other family members in terms of power and wealth. However, with childbearing, this newcomer ascended the ranks of the family hierarchy, thus gaining more status and power in community and family affairs.¹²⁵

In nomadic cultures such as these in Africa and others in Asia, North America, and elsewhere around the globe, women had similar rights to men. In Sub-Saharan Africa, small populations of nomadic persons often lived on vast lands, so crops were raised collectively rather than individually on private plots. Those who planted and harvested the food had the rights to it, and in these areas, women and children often performed much of this agriculture work, thus giving them the power to distribute and barter with food.¹²⁶ Women were permitted to divorce their husbands if their families returned to the husbands the bridewealth. During this era, many Nigerian villages had both male and female rulers, and women routinely formed organizations that took collective action against abusive husbands, became mutual aid societies, regulated markets and negotiated prices, mediated arguments, decided legal cases, and represented

¹²⁴ Vishanthie Sewpaul, “Culture, Religion, and Infertility: A South African Perspective,” *British Journal of Social Work* 29 (1999): 741-754.

¹²⁵ “Gender & Power: Yoruba, Maasai, Igbo,” *Women & Religion in Africa* March 31, 2013, <http://blog.uvm.edu/vlbrenna-rel163/gender-power/>

¹²⁶ Estelle B. Freedom, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*.

women's issues and concerns.¹²⁷ These women often became wealthy through their economic participation and dealings.

Of course, not all societies were egalitarian; at best, we can ascertain that gender relations and women's status in society is characterized by ambivalence – by both patriarchy and women's agency. According to the Guttentag and Secord Theory, to the extent that men outnumber women, women will be forced into repressive sex roles because they become “scarce goods”; however, to the extent that women outnumber men, women will have greater power and freedom.¹²⁸ In the pre-Christian Greco-Roman world, men far outnumbered women because abortion and infanticide were legal. Men in many of the male-dominated pagan regions considered women their property, weak and of little value beyond breeding. Thus, female infants were put to death, and abortions were performed, often killing both the mother and the baby.¹²⁹ In Greece, during the Classical Period, women were by law placed under the male head of the extended family, who acted as their guardian until the women had birthed three or four children.¹³⁰ These guardians arranged marriages for the women for whom they had charge, generally by the time the young ladies had reached 14, and, though both men and women could initiate divorce, any children the women bore became the property of the men in the event of divorce. However, in spite of these patriarchal family arrangements, women in Ancient Greece could also be educated, could inherit and hold wealth, and could manage their households and children's education. Moreover, records show that women in Sparta – though instructed that their

¹²⁷ Estelle B. Freedom, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*.

¹²⁸ Marcia Guttentag and Paul E. Secord, eds., “Introduction: The Sex Ratio Question,” in *Too Many Women?* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1983), 13-33.

¹²⁹ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 117-121.

¹³⁰ Elisabeth M. Tetlow, “The Status of Women in Greek, Roman, and Jewish Society,” in *Women and Ministry in the New Testament*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), 5-29.

role was to bear children – were fed, educated, athletically trained, and allowed to marry later in their lives, thus facing less dangerous pregnancies. Not only this, but women also on occasion successfully refused to bear multiple children, demonstrating the effective implementation of their agency in a patriarchal culture.¹³¹ Thus, even in Western civilizations with reputations for patriarchy, these cultures do not monolithically place males over females in every situation. This is significant because we see that the Western development of the preference for male-headed nuclear family structures, featuring submissive child-bearing women without equal access to economic wealth and status, has never been thoroughly absolute or axiomatic in even highly patriarchal societies.

In Ancient Judaism, too, the relationships between men and women were characterized by ambivalence; in some instances and practices, women held positions of power and status, while in others, women were denigrated and placed under the headship of men. Families during this time period were organized by both kinship and economic relationships and included extended family, concubines, and servants – in short, anyone who resided on the property or in the household of the patriarch. Women gained status in this culture by bearing children, specifically sons, but sterile women could be divorced, and polygamy could be practiced by men as a way of producing more male heirs. Notably, childlessness was always deemed the fault of the female. Furthermore, while bearing children was a means for a woman to gain status, power, and respect in a patriarchal society, this too carries with it ambivalence. During both menstruation and pregnancy, women were considered “*niddah*”, or ritually impure, an infectious condition that necessitated the segregation of women during this time from men in the home, in worship, and in the public sphere. According to Tirzah Meacham, Associate Professor of

¹³¹ Elisabeth M. Tetlow, “The Status of Women in Greek, Roman, and Jewish Society.”

Talmudic and Rabbinic Literature at the University of Toronto, this same term, *niddah*, is used in the Bible for abominations, especially concerning sexual sins and idols, and became a metaphor for sin and impurity in general.¹³² Thus, the very condition that afforded women in this era status – childbearing and the extension of kinship and family structures – was related to sinfulness, separation, and abominations. While women often rose to higher statuses and greater public roles in Judaism than in the surrounding Roman and Greek cultures, these assertions of female power and agency were often met with countermovements to suppress women’s empowerment and assert patriarchy. In her research on the roles of women in ancient cultures, Elisabeth M. Tetlow finds that during the Jewish Diaspora, many Jewish women acquired wealth and education and participated in business and politics. In a reaction against these progressive women, many Jewish men in power held to a strict literal interpretation of the Torah and often portrayed women as temptresses and evil sex objects. Furthermore, such an interpretation contended that women could not be educated, nor could they study the Torah, make pilgrimages, or pray at meals.¹³³ Thus, the theologies developed from these interpretations generally privileged men and relegated women to submissive and domestic roles.

However, this was not the only extant interpretation of the Torah during this time. Although many Jewish sects that were highly influenced by Hellenism often possessed higher degrees of patriarchy and oppressive roles and messages for women, other sects, like the Elephantine community in Egypt allowed women to conduct business, own property, initiate divorce, be taxed, and even serve in the military.¹³⁴ Such practices drew their theological support

¹³² Tirzah Meacham, *Jewish Women’s Archive*, s.v. “Female Purity (Niddah),” March 1, 2009, accessed March 3, 2016, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/female-purity-niddah>.

¹³³ Elisabeth M. Tetlow, “The Status of Women in Greek, Roman, and Jewish Society.”

¹³⁴ Ibid.

by pointing to figures such as Deborah, the judge of Israel, Miriam and other prophetesses, and the unnamed woman in Proverbs 31 and emphasized teachings such as the purpose of marriage as companionship, children's honoring of both the father and the mother, and the creation of both male and female in the image of God.

As early Christianity grew out of the cultures of Second Temple Judaism and Hellenism, it carried with it the same ambivalence as the other cultures – liberating women in many ways while also supporting their oppression in others. On the whole, it initially proved more empowering and liberative to women than Greco-Roman cultures due in part to its prohibition of infanticide. This partially accounts for the increasing number of women in the Christian movement. In fact, women in early Christianity outnumbered men, a factor that, according to the Guttentag and Secord Theory, often promotes the empowerment of women. As women's presence and freedom in the Christian movement expanded, more women joined the sect. In these early days of Christianity, women were not seen as property or objects but rather as equals with men before God.¹³⁵ The Apostle Paul proclaims in Galatians 3:28, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."¹³⁶ This spirit of egalitarianism is demonstrated in the sharing of religious leadership and duties amongst male and female Christians and the regard given to certain male and female figures alike in the Christian Scriptures and in Early Christianity. For example, Mary the mother of Jesus was revered for her faith, her proclamation of God in the Magnificat, and her loving obedience to the Lord. According to Jaroslav Pelikan, the record of Jesus' birth from Mary's perspective suggests her as "primary among these original eyewitnesses and servants of

¹³⁵ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 104, 115.

¹³⁶ Galatians 3:28 (The Amplified Bible).

the Gospel.”¹³⁷ The high status with which women like Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Dorcas were regarded plays an important part in the attraction of women to Christianity in the Early Church.

Significantly, Luke 8 refers to a following of women whom Jesus welcomed as disciples in the same manner that he did his inner circle of twelve, and the book of Acts records the conversion of a wealthy woman from Asia Minor named Lydia, who later established a house-church (Acts 16:40). Additionally, Acts 18:26 mentions the work of Prisca who aided Paul’s ministry and taught Apollos, a Jewish convert, accurate theology. This same apostle Paul is reported to have authored a number of epistles included in the Christian New Testament that attest to the leadership of women in this new religious movement. For example, in Romans 16, he includes references to women leaders and ministers, along with exhortations to churches to aid these women in whatever way they request, thus placing certain churches under the leadership and in the service of select women. As scholar of Early Christianity Peter Brown notes, “Christianity welcomed women into leadership positions that neither paganism nor Judaism offered,”¹³⁸ and Mary T. Malone corroborates this statement by saying that in Christianity, old dispensations of Judaic household hierarchies and prohibitions against women no longer applied.¹³⁹ Thus, women began taking on both religious and public roles based upon the teachings of Scripture that promoted the equality of all humanity, despite the coexisting presence of patriarchal passages.

¹³⁷ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 18.

¹³⁸ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 109

¹³⁹ Mary T. Malone, *Women and Christianity, Vol. I: The First Thousand Years*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 67.

The Spread of Patriarchy

Notable changes in philosophy and religion took place prior to and during the transition from agrarian and communal societies to more industrial and privatized social organizations, a shift that is often (correctly) pinpointed as a catalyst for modern iterations of patriarchal power. According to Estelle B. Freedman, men and women in early hunter-gatherer societies had distinct but complementary tasks, but they shared important economic and religious duties, which were legitimated by religious narratives and beliefs. In societies such as that of the Igbo, the worship of the female deity Idemili had once provided the grounds for the cultural beliefs in and regard for women's power in the family and in industry.¹⁴⁰ However, more and more, these goddesses were supplanted by male deities. Ancient Greco-Roman cultures worshiped a variety of female deities which were slowly replaced by male gods – eventually even being subsumed into a single male deity.¹⁴¹ In the ancient Middle East, fertility goddess Astarte and Greek earth goddess Gaia were originally worshipped but later replaced by or absorbed into male deities. Even Buddhism, which does not worship a deity but rather seeks gender-neutral enlightenment, developed over time an emphasis upon the Buddha's male qualities, and Christianity and Judaism alike highlighted the “male qualities” of their God to the detriment of extant “female analogies” for and qualities said to be possessed by this God.¹⁴² This process of replacing female deities with male deities has been repeated in other areas of the world such as Africa in even more recent ages. The replacement of female deities with male deities is significant in that women could no longer appeal to divine example to argue for rights or to assert their power.

¹⁴⁰ “Gender & Power: Yoruba, Maasai, Igbo,” *Women & Religion in Africa* (web log), March 31, 2013, <http://blog.uvm.edu/vlbrenna-rel163/gender-power/>

¹⁴¹ Estelle B. Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*, 22.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 20.

Latin American liberation theologian Ana Maria Tepedino identifies the basis of early Western Christian concepts of gender and authority as arising from a “Kiriarchical system” that developed from the intersection of cultures in ancient Palestine. As Tepedino asserts, this system valued rationality, power, and objectivity and identified these as “male traits”, while women were identified with the much-denigrated emotionality, irrationality, and passion. Tepedino contends that the illustration of God as “head” of the Church and of men as “heads” of women and families is a manifestation of this Kiriarchical system and also creates an elision between male and divine authority.¹⁴³ Likewise, postmodern theologian John D. Caputo states that the Christian Church has “given Divine sanction to sexism by pointing to heavenly patriarchy as the model for the rule of earthly fathers.”¹⁴⁴ Thus, legitimation of male authority and the separation of distinct male and female “essences” has a significant historical tie to the image of a patriarchal God.

These patriarchal strands in early Christian theologies were both produced by and contributed to popular logics of dualism that pervaded much Hellenistic philosophy and religion. These logics of dualism were predicated upon the concept that the world has internal and oppositional divisions inherent to it, and that these dualistic categories were defined in a sense by their alienation from one another and their “opposite-ness” to each other. For example, human culture, seen as the realm of human control, was juxtaposed with nature, which, according to feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, was viewed as consisting of spontaneous processes that humans cannot control but upon which we are dependent. Control was inevitably

¹⁴³ Ana Maria Tepedino, “Gender and New (Re-newed) Images of the Divine,” in *Global Voices for Gender Justice*, eds. Ramathate T.H Dolamo, Ana Maria Tepedino, and Dwight N. Hopkins, (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 84-96.

¹⁴⁴ John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 105.

preferred over a lack of control – read as chaos, so humans took their position in the hierarchy over nature. When this dualism was imposed upon theological anthropology, women were equated with the “natural” because of their uncontrollable biological processes such as menstruation, pregnancy, and childbearing, upon which life is dependent. Meanwhile, men were seen as having “progressed” beyond that which cannot be controlled and were now considered to be the producers of culture, which rules over and controls nature.¹⁴⁵ Additionally, by speaking of God as male or as having characteristics deemed by them to be typically masculine (such as omnipotence, strength, and authority), men were able to appeal to their “likeness” to God in their kindred maleness as rationale for their own dominative power over women and authority in society and religious spaces. In such a way, men gained for themselves the justification and power to produce “knowledge” as well, including histories, theologies, laws, morality, and other epistemologies in ways that privileged men and constructed a metanarrative of gender roles and sexual essences.

Another popular means of securing patriarchal hierarchies and the submissiveness of women was (and still is) to reference New Testament epistles that reputedly advocate for the headship of men over women and the inappropriateness of women’s leadership in church, the family, and society. The Apostle Paul, who also wrote about the egalitarianism of women and men in Galatians 3:28, appears to prohibit women from speaking in church in I Corinthians 14:34-36; however, this is at variance with most other things Paul writes concerning women in leadership, argues sociologist and historian Rodney Stark.¹⁴⁶ In I Corinthians 11:5, Paul himself

¹⁴⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 72f.

¹⁴⁶ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 108.

instructs women to cover their heads when praying or prophesying, an instruction that assumes that women have a legitimate public ministry. In other passages like Romans 16:1-16 and Philippians 4:2-3, Paul advocates for and ensures the ability of women to hold leadership positions and in fact to give direction to both men and women. Moreover, Acts 2:17-21, 5:14, 8:12, 9:1-2 and 36-42, 12:12, 16:12-15 and 40, 17:4-34, 18:2-3 and 24-28, and 21:19 record Paul interacting with women and female Christian leaders in ways that endorse their ministry and spiritual gifts. So what happened to compromise gender equality and to promote patriarchy in the Early Church?

Tatha Wiley maintains that the apparent inconsistencies testify not necessarily to Paul's attitudes so much as to a culture that related to imperial power ambivalently. During the time that the New Testament epistles were composed and distributed, Judea was a colonized land under the Roman Empire. The Pax Romana, touted as "salvation for all" under the absolute power of the deified emperor, meant, for the Jews and other colonized persons, a loss of independence and subordination under a violent ruler who required obedience and tribute.¹⁴⁷ The Jewish priestly class and other elite were allowed to govern religious matters and were appointed to political positions of power, but their benefit was tenuous. The Roman government would take over at any sign of rebellion. However, the Jewish elite had more to lose and to protect, writes Wiley, and thus tended towards pro-imperialism. Read against this setting, Christ's resistance to empire takes the shape of proclamation of the reign of God, in direct contrast to the form and content of Roman rule. Paul uses this same means of proclamation, and Wiley asserts that his writings and the witness to his actions in Acts testify to a unity in Paul's public ministry and theology that situate him as a postcolonial resistor of empire and proclaimer of the new order of God's

¹⁴⁷ Tatha Wiley, "Paul and Early Christianity," in *Empire: The Christian Tradition*, eds. Kwok Pui-lan, Don H Compier, and Joerg Rieger, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 48-49.

kingdom in our midst. The problem is that other letter writers used Paul's reputation and authority to write under his name letters that have made it into the Christian canon and have been traditionally attributed to Paul. Wiley divides these letters into two "voices": 1) the Deutero-Pauline authors, and 2) the Anti-Judaic authors. Our concern here is mostly for the first voice. Recent scholarship has cast doubt that the books of Colossians, Ephesians, and I Timothy were written by Paul. All three of these texts reappropriate patriarchal values for the church that Paul opposed in texts like Galatians 3:28 and in his mention of female ministers as his "coworkers" in Philippians 4. In these texts, argues Wiley, "imperial values of hierarchy, order, and obedience became Christian values," and "the assembly [church] became the 'household of God,' patterned after the patriarchal household, in which relations of domination and subordination govern the place of each in the household" (cf. I Timothy 3:15).¹⁴⁸ These authors mystified patriarchal hierarchies in the family by equating the man – or, in the case of slave-owning households, the master – with Christ and submission to this authority as the subordinate's due. As Wiley explains, obedience was a primary obligation under imperialism and "now constitutes the condition of justification and salvation for women and slaves," while sin was equated with disobedience of this order.¹⁴⁹ This thus gave class and male privileges the status of divine revelation, according to Wiley, the likes of which Paul explicitly opposed by saying that in the Christian community, categories of privilege and oppression ought to be obsolete.

However, Paul's authorship of I Corinthians is undisputed, and in this letter Paul does challenge female prophets in the community at Corinth. Amongst scholars, there are a variety of explanations for this. Robert K. Johnston proposes that Paul's letter to the Corinthians was meant

¹⁴⁸ Tatha Wiley, "Paul and Early Christianity," 51.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 51.

to address specific problems in that community, namely that uneducated women were disrupting the order of worship by asking questions. In that time, it was common practice for messages during worship to be handled much like a lecture, with listeners asking questions of the speaker. The problem was that women were not permitted to receive the standard religious or academic education available to men, and so when the Corinthian community was visited by heretical teachers, these women were susceptible to believing their false teachings. During community worship, these women were speaking up alongside male congregants but sharing the heresies they had learned, thus disrupting worship. Read in the context of the entire chapter, I Corinthians 14 appears to be Paul's summary concerning order in public worship in Corinth, which is consistent with his goal of bringing order to the Christian community so that the proclamation of Christ could spread to wider society and so that the Christian fellowship would grow. Johnston insists that Paul had no intention of arguing for the maintenance of a hierarchical status quo as the church's aim. In terms of Paul's comments on marital relationships, I Corinthians 7:1-5 seems to be advocating for Christian marriage as a partnership between equals. Johnston points to Paul's full symmetry in grammar and content regarding husbands and wives as an indication that mutual love and self-giving were, to Paul, the goal of Christian relationships. Yet, in I Corinthians 11:2-15, Paul seems to uphold cultural practices of women's veiling and long hair as an expression of their difference from males and dependence on their husbands. It appears that in this passage, Paul juxtaposes the created order in which men and women are differentiated ("in the flesh") with male and female equality in Christ's redemptive world order ("in the Lord", perhaps insinuating that the latter is the ultimate reality. Furthermore, Johnston argues that modern interpretations of I Corinthians 11:3, in which husbands are said to be the "head" of their wives, have inferred a hierarchical construction, while the original Greek would probably have

been free of this implication. Instead, Johnston maintains, “head” would have been read as “source” or “origin.”¹⁵⁰

Although Paul’s words about male-female relationships in I Corinthians seems to invoke a hierarchical structure, we must keep in mind a few things. First, as Johnston indicates, alternative understandings of Paul’s writings seem valid enough to at least trouble our presumption of Paul as upholding male privilege. Second, efforts to discern Paul’s original intent will perhaps always be supposition and, at best, educated guesses because we cannot recreate the cultural context or hear his words as his original audience would. Third, hermeneutical responsibility requires that we read Paul in the context of his other writings and actions. By doing so, it would seem that, regardless of what he wrote to the Corinthians or what human inconsistencies he might have had, Paul envisioned an egalitarian Christian community in which men and women ministered side by side as theologically well-informed and as equally gifted and equally redeemed.

But if Paul was not, in fact, hammering social hierarchies and class and sex privilege into all Christian communities, the presence of epistles authored by pseudo-Pauline writers testify to his either being understood by some to support such structures or else being co-opted by those who felt this was the best means of keeping order. Perhaps Paul’s mentions of order in worship were mistaken by those who lacked access to his full canon of epistles and travel stories to be his central teaching, and following the cultural ideal of hierarchy and obedience, this rubric was taught as the divinely authorized means of keeping peace and order in fledgling Christian communities. By any count, this reading of both Paul’s and Jesus’s ministries actually introduces

¹⁵⁰ Robert K. Johnston, “The Role of Women in the Church and Family: The Issue of Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Evangelicals at an Impasse: Biblical Authority in Practice*, in *Religion Online*, accessed December 28, 2017, www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-three-the-role-of-women-in-the-church-and-family-the-issue-of-biblical-hermeneutics/

inconsistencies and disharmony in Christian teachings. Thus, we see in this New Testament dissonance at least two means of distributing power – in one, an egalitarianism in which hierarchy is abolished, physical and spiritual liberation held in equal regard, and access to Christian ministry available to all persons; in the other, a centralizing of power amongst a certain sex, ethnic group, and socioeconomic class in a patriarchal hierarchy. In the latter, patriarchy is inseparable from classism and racism, and justifying the power structure as divinely sanctioned became a major undertaking of theologians.

The attribution of epistles like Ephesians and I Timothy to Paul and the misreading of Paul's central theological precepts served imperial interests as later, under Christendom, Western Christianity became intertwined with economic and political imperialism. As Wiley writes, "The appeal to Paul has justified Christian teachings on the legitimacy of slavery, male domination, the exclusivity of salvation, and the subjugation of peoples."¹⁵¹ Theologies justified not only the imbrication of religion, economics, and politics but also the centralization of power within a few elite males of certain status and ethnicity, as well as the violent overthrow, disempowerment, and oppression of the socioeconomic, gendered, and ethnic "Other." Christendom's ideology was rooted in dualism - separating, essentializing, and reifying categories like sex and the private and public spheres, gendering the latter. In this move, concepts of power – whether divine or human – became entrenched in domination and conceived as hierarchical. Since Christendom, Christianity has been intertwined with economic and political imperialism. In this move, concepts of power became conceived as hierarchical and as domination over others, and an androcentric image of God predominated. Thus, certain versions of Christian theology have lent themselves to the construction of social hierarchies determined by domination over one another,

¹⁵¹ Tatha Wiley, "Paul and Early Christianity," 55.

so that the concept of shared benefits has often been ignored or even denigrated. Additionally, hypermasculinity, the equation of maleness with aggression, competition, authority, and domination, was elided with ideal power, so that the performance of this norm served as the means of attaining power. To this end, many theologians in the early Christian church began to weave together theories of gender, Christianity, and sexual morality. Influential thinkers such as Augustine, who taught that sexual intercourse was a necessary evil that unfortunately passed along original sin, and Tertullian, who believed that sex drives out the Holy Spirit, both contributed to the concept of sex and sexuality as dangerous and mystical and also encouraged a misogynistic view of women within Christianity.¹⁵² According to these men, sex was a consequence of the Fall and thus sinful, and women were often viewed as the transmitters of this sin, as temptresses, or as distortions of males or of the image of God. Though married and the author of what could be construed as a love note to his wife, Tertullian also wrote of women the following scathing diagnosis:

Do you not know that Eve is you? The curse God pronounced on your sex weighs still on the world. Guilty, you must bear its hardships. You are the devil's gateway, you desecrated that fatal tree, you first betrayed the law of God, you who softened up with your cajoling words the man against whom the devil could not prevail by force. The image of God, the man Adam, you broke him, it was child's play to you. You deserved death, and it was the son of God who had to die!¹⁵³

Around this time in the fourth century, power became centralized in an all-male clergy, and women lost many of their Christian and human liberties. Jerome, translator of the Latin Vulgate, proclaimed that “as long as a woman is for birth and children, she is different from man

¹⁵² Tertullian, *On Exhortation to Chastity*, trans. Rev. S. Thelwall, July 30, 2003, http://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf04/anf04-15.htm#P946_228818.

¹⁵³ Rudolph Arbesmann, Sister Emily Joseph Daly, and Edwin A. Quain, *Disciplinary, Moral, and Ascetical Works*, (Catholic University of America Press, 1959) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt32b2dj>, (accessed March 3, 2016).

as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world then she will cease to be a woman, and will be called a man.”¹⁵⁴ In other words, as Christendom increased its economic and political reach, women began to be viewed in Christianity and in the culture at large as irredeemably attached to base, worldly, and sinful elements. As long as a woman bore children, she was seen as serving the world and her bodily lusts rather than God. However, a woman was not expected to be able to do anything else; therefore, the “selfless” choice of remaining celibate and perhaps joining a religious order could only be performed by a male – and so women who made this choice were said to “become male.”

Empire and Patriarchy

In conjunction with this shift in religious tenets and in philosophy, an economic and social shift took place that formally and materially divided men and women and promoted the atomization of families, with a male authority in each. Estelle B. Freedman argues that the separation of home and work and the ensuing dualistic and gendered division of public and private spheres arose in connection with economic developments. “When these egalitarian societies shifted to settled agriculture [between 3100 and 600 BCE],” contends Freedman, “they developed complicated class and gender relations.”¹⁵⁵ Humans began engaging in more specialized farming, bartering surplus goods, and creating class hierarchies with patriarchal families. According to Freedman, this patriarchy prohibited women’s inheritance and made wives subjects in their husbands’ homes.¹⁵⁶ What Freedman’s work elucidates is an apparent

¹⁵⁴ Ronald E. Heine, *The Commentaries of Origin and Jerome on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians* (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 2002.)

¹⁵⁵Estelle B. Freedman, *No Turning Back*, 22

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 22.

widespread connection between a particular shift in economics towards what we now know as capitalism and a logic of dualism that separates public/economic/political spaces and private/domestic spaces. This dualism also includes the reification and essentialization of the categories of male and female, pitting them as opposites and strict categories of identity and associating them each with “appropriate” spheres.

Furthermore, as religion - in particular, Christianity - became intertwined with economic and political imperialism under Christendom, one of the most potent means of justification of the power of “Empire” has been the creation of dualisms, wherein one side of the dichotomy is rendered “the Other.” Women were thus pitted as a denigrated Other, a foil to the male leader who is more spiritual and intelligent and more suited for power than women. Kwok Pui-lan explains that an aspect of Christology used to solidify colonial rule was the glorification of Jesus’ suffering and sacrifice. Colonizing forces, such as white slaveowners and North and South American explorers, pioneers, conquistadors, and military, would depict the broken Christ as accomplishing salvation in another world in order to pacify the colonized and exhort black women and Native Americans, respectively, to model themselves after this endurance of pain. As Kwok writes, religious language often “camouflages oppressive reality and sacralizes the pain of debased servanthood.”¹⁵⁷

As the subsistence economy that characterized human communities yielded to monetary economies, men’s wage-earning increased in importance and women’s contributions decreased in value. While periods of sustained economic growth introduced long-distance trade, monetary systems, and market economies in early civilizations like Babylon and the early Middle Eastern

¹⁵⁷ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 184.

and Mediterranean empires, the first charters for a formal economy of sorts date back to the eleventh century in Europe.¹⁵⁸ However, most of the world's population continued in subsistence economies until around the eighteenth century. In agrarian and subsistence societies, childbearing was an economic act because children were valuable assets.¹⁵⁹ For example, Gerda Lerner contends that when a new farming system in the Middle East based on private land ownership and domesticated farm animals was introduced, a hierarchical state based on the patriarchal rule of fathers in the family emerged, and female deities were replaced by male deities and monotheism. Furthermore, argues Lerner, children became economic assets in that they helped families produce more crops, allowing the accumulation of surpluses and increasing private family wealth. Reproduction thus became a commodity, and women's bodies were objectified and commodified. Significantly, Lerner's research reveals an economic rationale behind moralities that place a premium on chastity before marriage. According to Lerner, women had to be chaste prior to marriage to ensure the husband's paternity of children and his ownership of the wealth produced by this.¹⁶⁰ Of course, women's control of this economic asset – childbearing and the raising of children – would be scandalous, so “single motherhood” (in which a woman would indeed have sole control of a commodity) was threatening to the very moral and economic fabric of society, which had become, since the earliest days of reliance upon pseudo-Pauline hierarchy codes, entrenched in notions of male headship and control of the family and its property.

¹⁵⁸ Mark Casson and John S. Lee, “The Origin and Development of Markets: A Business History Perspective,” *Business History Review* 85 (Spring 2011): 9-37.

¹⁵⁹ Ann Crittenden, *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World Is Still the Least Valued*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001), 49.

¹⁶⁰ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

The Industrial Revolution

During the Industrial Revolution, when work became separated from the home, children were no longer an economic asset but were instead economic liabilities. This led not only to the decrease of family sizes in non-agrarian and Western societies but also to something more complex. Because economic value has long been a primary determinant in the amount of power an entity possesses in society, when women were valued for their ability to aid their families and communities economically through childbearing, they often enjoyed more power in terms of decision-making, access to wealth, and even political and religious influence. However, as economic production moved outside of the home and as childbearing lost its economic value, women's power diminished. As Michèle Barrett and Meredith W. Michaels write in their provocative text of cultural criticism, *The Anti-Social Family*, the separation of work from the home led to the development of the home as a privatized and personal realm, contra the public world of social production, as well as to the notion that the privatized family would be supported by a breadwinner.¹⁶¹ Furthermore, industry leaders and colonizers often only trained males in the operation of new technologies in colonized lands, creating between men and women a growing global knowledge gap directly related to the means of economic thriving. Even when women did in fact work in factories and machinery, they were given only rudimentary training in how to utilize the technology's function, not in learning how to own, operate, and manufacture the technology itself.

At this point, what had occurred was the conflation of power with economic wealth and with ownership of the means of creating that wealth, and with this came privatization. Patriarchal and classist systems in centuries past had laid the groundwork for the capitalist system, which

¹⁶¹ Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family*, (London: NLB, 1982), 93.

revolves around ownership rather than labor as the main source of status and power in a society. According to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, “Empire...[is] the convergence of economic, political, cultural and military interests that constitute a system of domination in which benefits flow primarily to the powerful.”¹⁶² These societies were by and large empires, determined through domination of the other, and imperialism forms the basis of present-day capitalism, in which power is centralized in an elite class who control decision-making and own the means of production. Capitalism emerged as the economic system of the Global North but quickly spread worldwide through colonialism, which was part of the logic of capitalism as empire. Later, in the twentieth century, this logic of capitalist empire would become known as neoliberalism, which refers more to the cultural ethos of deregulation, privatization, and competition, features which were latent in American and Western cultures for centuries, even millennia prior. Néstor Míguez, Joerg Rieger, and Jung Mo Sung explain that empire in any iteration, be it early capitalist, colonialist, or neoliberal (which, it bears mentioning to say, are all interrelated and imbricated rather than separate or sequential), is “fed by a common *ethos* and annuls the validity of other powers and the emergence of different options,” a reality demonstrated in the monolithic celebration of power as domination and the singular acceptance of the nuclear family as the only ideal form¹⁶³.

As competition became the bedrock of capitalism during the Industrial Revolution and undercut extended social networks and communal-based societies, the nuclear family was touted as the primary form of social organization in Western Europe and North America. At this time,

¹⁶² 24th General Council of the WARC, “Globalization and ‘Empire’: A Challenge to Christian Mission,” 2004, Accra, Ghana, accessed December 30, 2017, http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/side/jsp?news_id=125&navi=1

¹⁶³ Néstor Míguez, Joerg Rieger, and Jung Mo Sung, *Beyond the Spirit of Empire: Theology and Politics in a New Key*, (London: SCM Press, 2009), 5.

production moved outside the home, and the American and French Revolutions made freedom, democracy, and individual rights the Global North's zeitgeist. Economic wealth became privatized, and those with power were those who owned the means of creating that wealth. With this came the atomizing of society into small productive units of private, wealth-holding citizens – known as the nuclear family. This newfound emphasis on private ownership as the means of wealth, power, and control in a developing class hierarchy created the nuclear family as a competitive unit, alienated from others in the community.

Friedrich Engels theorizes that private property is the source of the “world historical defeat of the female sex.”¹⁶⁴ By deregulating the market and encouraging private ownership over state or communal ownership of economic initiatives and resources, women's distance from power increased. By privatizing the economy and its goods and services, individual men and male-led corporations controlled the means to power in society. As private families and values that emphasized such families replaced communal-based societies, and as competition between families became the means of ascending the class ladder, women lost a network of support linking them to other women, and were denied access to resources for their thriving and to the means of neoliberal power – that is, control and domination in the economy. At the same time, married women were subsumed into a single legal entity represented by their husbands. Additionally, gross domestic product only counted the value of goods and services that were sold, thus discounting women's unpaid labor in the home, even though their work enabled men to have careers and to save money on childcare and domestic work.¹⁶⁵ Work and labor became

¹⁶⁴ Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, (New York: International Publishers, 1942), 50.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

equated with “men’s work” that produced a cash income, while unpaid work was considered unproductive and excluded from the economy. According to Nancy Folbre, “the moral elevation of the home was accompanied by the economic devaluation of the work performed there.”¹⁶⁶

By encouraging private ownership of economic initiatives and resources, women’s distance from power increased – but so did the gulf between the elite class and the middle and working classes. Patriarchy only celebrated a narrow range of masculine identities and concepts of power and fueled political, social, and economic systems that rewarded these forms of (hyper)masculinity. Allen Johnson defines patriarchy as a male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered society, and under patriarchy, a version of capitalism flourished in which domination, control of others, aggression, and competition became the means of achieving power.¹⁶⁷ As business became corporatized, most middle-class male workers found themselves employed in large bureaucracies in which they had little voice in the company itself or in their work, hours, or job security. As domination over others became the language and means of power in privatized capitalism, many middle-class men felt the need to confirm their masculinity through dominance and authority, and, as gender scholar Valerie Lehr argues, men’s core values and identities increasingly hinged upon their authority and control in the family, especially in relation to their wives.¹⁶⁸ Therefore, the valuing of domination, competition, and control in such capitalist societies both distanced the middle and working classes from access to economic power while also constructing a norm of hypermasculinity that, when embodied by men,

¹⁶⁶ Nancy Folbre, “The Unproductive Housewife: Her Evolution in Nineteenth-Century Economic Thought,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 16, no. 3 (Spring, 1991): 463-484.

¹⁶⁷ Allan Johnson, *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*, (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University, 2005).

¹⁶⁸ Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values: Rethinking the Myth of the Nuclear Family*, (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1999), 62.

afforded them some benefit while making most women – and many men, too – collateral damage in their success.

To support the division of the private and public spheres and the separation of men's and women's lives and work, the metanarrative of gender complementarianism was emphasized in religious communities and popular culture. This metanarrative argued that heterosexual marriage was necessary to produce complete social and economic units. An indication of civilization and rationality in this system, born out of a Lockean notion of rationality as that which promotes the creation of wealth through labor, was holding a properly gendered sense of self and a recognition that this self – and its rationality – would be enhanced by being joined to another of the opposite sex.¹⁶⁹ Men's public sphere was characterized by productivity, while women's private or domestic sphere was characterized by abstinence – from physical or workplace labor, as well as aggression, immorality, self-indulgence, worldliness, and sexual indulgence. Productivity in terms of childbearing was deemed appropriate for women within a prescribed framework of the nuclear family, in which this “labor” was under the authority of the male spouse, controlled by the husband; excessive productivity in childbearing or engagement in this outside of the prescribed framework transgressed the abstinence that ought to mark a Christian woman and good capitalist.

At this time, the Global North was experiencing the height of the Enlightenment Era, during which humanistic ideologies flourished through scientific and technological progress, global powers ruled far-flung colonies, and the Protestant Ethic, Manifest Destiny, and Calvinistic covenant theology justified imperialism as a divine obligation to civilize the “heathen”, thus supporting the growing system of capitalism. According to Margaret Lamberts

¹⁶⁹ Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values*, 57.

Bendroth's interpretation of this history, the middle-class family was seen as a civilizing force above all others in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the home became the site of purity, innocence, and righteousness, of which the mother was the protector.¹⁷⁰ In this family structure, the male and female were seen as complementary opposites, with the male taking to the public sphere the love and altruism nurtured in the private sphere of the home through the woman's domestic care. The primary objective of child-rearing was essentially to produce workers with "capitalistic spirit" and "Christian virtue."¹⁷¹ Maternal employment raised concerns about the blurring of lines between husband and wife that was thought to lead to detrimental and disharmonious interactions within the family, the sacred sphere of morality.¹⁷² This "separate spheres" ideology did in fact discourage women from striving for greater public and economic participation but also gave mothers the power and authority to raise children as they saw fit – within reason.¹⁷³

Sexuality during the Industrial Revolution was heavily influenced both by American Protestantism's Puritan and pietistic ancestry, by traditional gender dualisms, and by the economic virtue of thrift. As Jonathan Ned Katz posits, ideals of true womanhood, manhood, and love developed with the economic transition to a market-based system and were thus characterized by "purity", defined as freedom from sensuality unless exercised within a proper

¹⁷⁰ Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, "Fundamentalism and the Family: Gender, Culture, and the American Pro-Family Movement," in *Nothing Sacred: Women Respond to Religious Fundamentalism and Terror*, ed. Betsy Reed, (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 2002), 262f.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 50-51.

¹⁷² Michael E. Lamb, *Nontraditional Families: Parenting and Child Development*, (Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1982), 4.

¹⁷³ Ann Crittenden, *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World Is Still the Least Valued*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001), 48.

marriage for the purpose of procreation. Not only did this ensure the legitimacy of offspring for inheritance purposes – which had been in play in many cultures for millennia, but which also closely aligned with a developing ethic of thrift – the idea that sex ought not to be wasted on pleasure but utilized for a productive, economic purpose that benefited the greater good.¹⁷⁴ In such a way, this vilification of premarital sex via emphasizing sexual purity as an appropriately feminine ideal had an economic incentive and shaped up in relation to economic values and practices. Relationships that produced children within a legal and economic system – specifically, marriage – were privileged and romanticized, and other relationships – platonic, same-sex, or non-marital – were either ignored or vilified.

During this era, what is known as the “angel of the hearth” mythology developed. In this prevailing mythology, women were moral exemplars who tended to the spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of children, while men deal with the material and economic. The woman, notes feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, represents the “original goodness of humanity as *imago dei*,” largely because of the rise of Mariology during this time and because women, occupying the domestic sphere, were thought to be shielded from the evils of the public sphere throughout history. However, the mother/wife holds this goodness in a fragile, vulnerable way and must be protected from the public sphere of men’s work, politics, and competition; otherwise, she will lose her goodness and femininity and become a carnal female or “she-male”.¹⁷⁵ Thus, not only the woman’s morality but also her possession of the image of God and her femaleness were predicated upon her conformity to a particular social structure that not only

¹⁷⁴ Jonathan Ned Katz, “The Invention of Heterosexuality,” in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study*, 10th edition, ed. Paula S. Rothenberg, (New York: Worth Publishers, 2016), 48.

¹⁷⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 104ff.

requires her membership in a nuclear family but also effectively cuts her off from politics, economic involvement and prosperity, and leadership or decision-making power in the public sphere. The woman lives vicariously through the male and “changes the world” only through her connections to and support of a husband. In such a way, women have for centuries and even in the modern Western world been an invisible lower class. They are both “protector” and “protected.”

Beyond the Global North

As Engels contends, private property is the source of “the world historical defeat of the female sex.”¹⁷⁶ According to this argument, women lost their egalitarian roles when individual, privatized families and wealth replaced existing kinship structures and dualistic notions of sex and society rose to the fore.

Illustrating Engels’ argument, alternative societies and systems to the privatized ownership of wealth and the corresponding privatized nuclear family existed and were deemed primitive by colonizers, a mindset that perpetuates in capitalist societies today. In many indigenous traditions, ownership was determined not by mastery over others, per se, but by labor; thus, those who worked the fields had the power to determine how best to distribute the harvest, and in such people groups, fields were often planted and harvested communally. Private ownership and in-group economic competition was not necessarily commonplace amongst these groups, and most of these cultures based their social structure on extended kinship networks rather than privatized nuclear families. Therefore, private ownership of wealth and power was a foreign concept amongst these groups.

¹⁷⁶ Friedrich Engels, *On the Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, (New York: International Publishers, 1893).

As missionaries from Europe and America began evangelism efforts in Africa, they also sought to “Christianize” African culture, oftentimes viewing pre-Christian culture and Christianity as mutually exclusive. This included the forms of family that differed from the Euro-American conception of the nuclear family, which formed the center and primary transmitter of Euro-American, colonial Christian culture. In fact, adherence to this model of familial structure was often made a prerequisite for baptism. The shift in Euro-American family structures from the model of extended kinship to the nuclear family obstructed with increased efficacy women’s involvement in political and public involvement and occurred largely because of economic shifts that supported the nuclear model of family. In certain regions and cultures, as in the case of the Igbo, the education and political involvement of women was not only permitted but valued. However, missionaries during the colonial era offered a differentiated education for males and females, focusing on domestic skills and Bible knowledge for women in order to train them to be Christian wives and mothers rather than active citizens who worked outside the home and participated in civil society. Additionally, in order to receive education through the mission schools, men and women alike had to convert to Christianity and abstain from rituals and practices deemed “pagan” by the missionaries – which included *mikiri*, the meeting of adult Igbo women to articulate their interests and promote self-rule under colonialism.¹⁷⁷ In 1929, Igbo women joined five other ethnic groups of women in Nigeria to stage the Women’s War against British colonial oppression and rule because they had experienced a loss of their political institutions not merely directly through colonialism but also through the influence of

¹⁷⁷ Judith Van Allen, “‘Sitting on a Man’: Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women,” in *Perspectives on Africa: A Reader in Culture, History, and Representation*, eds. Roy Richard Grinker and Christopher B. Steiner (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 539, 547.

missionaries and their representation of Igbo culture, which obscured the political involvement of Igbo women.

In addition to the global, increasing “knowledge gap” between males and females due to colonial, capitalist, industrial education of males alone, another development during this era was the equation of the nuclear family with economic progress and modernization and the conflation of both the nuclear family and modernization with Christianity. The nuclear family came to be presented as a divinely ordained structure and institution that, when correctly modeled, brought with it morality and prosperity. This family structure severed the African woman’s ties to her ancestors and isolated her from her community to which she was formerly so intimately connected. Aside from direct pressure from missionaries to conform to the model of the nuclear family, the subtle allure and infiltration of neoliberalism led – and continues to lead – to an increased tendency to adhere to this configuration of the nuclear family. The new emphasis on capitalism and economic prosperity was promoted by many forms of African Pentecostalism, which even today link “stewardship” and a revamping of personal habits to a “born-again” identity and prosperity gospel. One of the modes of change motivated by this focus is the choice to transform conceptions of family to the nuclear model. To compensate for this absence of connectedness to kinship networks, the church becomes one’s new family, offering a new group identity and support mechanisms.¹⁷⁸ The influence of capitalism and the market system on women’s lived experiences results in a new sense of belonging concentrated in the church but also undermines the importance of women’s roles as those who ensure the connectedness of kinship networks.

¹⁷⁸ Robert C. Garner, “Religion as a Source of Social Change in the New South Africa,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 30, no. 3 (2000): 315.

The Rise of American Civil Religion

Interestingly, the demonization of women became less prominent in Western Europe and North America during the Victorian era, during which femininity and motherhood were idealized and romanticized. In the new conception of the private, nuclear, male-headed family as the building block of a moral society and the Christian Church as a sanctified substitute for the extended kinship network, the dualistic gendered divisions of the public, male sphere and its antithesis in the domestic, female sphere predominated. Notably, access to the public sphere was the means in Western capitalist society of obtaining power through the accumulation of wealth, and historically women's power in a society has been directly related to their access to wealth. The sequestering of women from the public sphere and the moralizing – even “Christianizing” – of this development created a powerful barrier between women and power.

This moral ideal had deep class-based implications. For one, to be able to live off a single, male-generated income and to afford to have one's wife stay home to raise children became the “American dream” and a marker of success in the middle class. Around the turn of the century, wage levels increased for middle-class workers, making it unnecessary for many women to work.¹⁷⁹ Stay-at-home mothers became symbols of economic success, equated with God's blessing. Whereas women used to gain power through access to and control of their own income, this new morality that developed around the propriety of a woman's place in the home denigrated those women who did work outside the home. Women's employment outside the home was rarely a choice but instead reflected familial economic need during the 18th through early 20th centuries. Thus, women in the working class or working poor symbolized the moral

¹⁷⁹ Michael Lamb, ed., *Nontraditional Families: Parenting and Child Development*, 2-3.

lack in this class, for by their work in the public sphere, they were thought to transgress gender propriety and become morally sullied by their contact with this world of economics and industry.

Not every Christian agreed that women were naturally ordained to be “angels of the hearth.” Christian fundamentalism, which rejected the natural goodness of any human, including women, was so named because it tended to produce lists of “fundamentals of the faith” from which no deviation was to be tolerated.¹⁸⁰ Protestant fundamentalists in the U.S. attempted to counter what they saw as the lukewarm piety and theological compromises of modernity by emphasizing personal conversion and the dissonance between their belief in the United States’ “chosenness” to be “Zion” and what they felt was America’s current performance as “Babylon.”¹⁸¹ This focus on the identity of the U.S. coincided with the ethos of “nation-building,” as patriotism rose to new heights during the first and second World Wars and as the rise of communism and the related Red Scare led to great anxiety amongst many Americans, who claimed that communists were trying to gain control of all American institutions and were responsible for the troubles the nation faced.¹⁸² Furthermore, the fundamentalist push for personal conversion meshed well with modern individualism. To support their Christianized individualism, Protestant fundamentalists imaged Christ as a “loner”, as “in the world” but distant from “The World” in all its evils.

Manifested in individualism and fundamentalism’s privileging of personal conversion, the dynamic of atomization may also be seen in the rise of the nuclear family during this time.

¹⁸⁰ William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America*, (New York: Broadway Books, 1996), 11.

¹⁸¹ Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, “Fundamentalism and the Family: Gender, Culture, and the American Pro-Family Movement,” 261.

¹⁸² William Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 11.

Atomization, a term used frequently in postmodern and postcolonial discourse, refers to the deconstructing of larger entities into their smallest *pure* and whole units. In the case of the emerging ethos of evangelicalism, this unit was seen as the family. Fundamentalists tended to view “modernist” homes as lacking moral authority and oftentimes equated this with either the idealization of women in the family or to women’s increasing public roles and presence.¹⁸³ However, in the postwar era and into the 1950s and 1960s, mainline Protestants began citing the rising divorce rates as evidence that the “world” was infiltrating the homes due to poor child-rearing and lack of religious nurturing by parents, abortion, premarital sex and other forms of sexual immorality, and homosexuality. Out of fundamentalism grew evangelicalism, which believed that Christians were called by God to “be in the world but not of the world.” That is, holding fast to the notion of U.S. as the “chosen land,” these Christians joined mainstream America in politics and other public forums, urging that only a revival and return to the traditional family could save the U.S.¹⁸⁴ Just as politically-motivated dualisms between nationalities, ethnicities, and class fuel demonization of the “Other,” so in this case does the clear delineation of “family values” and the acceptable family structure serve as a means for determining the godly and the ungodly, the true patriot and the subversive enemy of the U.S.

Family Planning as a “Christian” Endeavor

Women born between 1865 and 1895 had the highest proportion of single women in U.S. history, which was cause for concern amongst the general public. According to Valerie Lehr,

¹⁸³ Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, “Fundamentalism and the Family: Gender, Culture, and the American Pro-Family Movement,” 265.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 267.

during this time, white middle-class women were giving birth to fewer children due to the religious and cultural emphasis on sexual control as virtue, even within marriage, which cohered with the value of middle-class thrift and the need for accumulation of wealth in private, nuclear families. At the same time, though, larger numbers of immigrants were entering the United States, and reproduction rates among these populations, as well as among black Americans and the working class, were higher. As fears of “race suicide” mounted, the middle-class value of sexual restraint became the answer, a metanarrative that was conjoined with pressure applied to white middle-class women to marry and produce children to offset any population decrease in the United States.¹⁸⁵ Fueling this metanarrative of the need for and propriety of the two-parent nuclear family, political, religious, and medical authorities issued statements promising blessings to those who conformed to these roles and vilifying those whose families took alternative forms or who deviated from the particular gender roles found exclusively in heterosexual, complementarian marriages. For example, President Theodore Roosevelt said that white women who chose not to have children committed a sin, the penalty for which was the death of the nation.¹⁸⁶ Medical professionals and psychologists assisted in the development of the idealization of the middle-class nuclear family by promising that women who accepted their gender complementarianism in marriage to men, as well as “male economic hegemony,” to use Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s terminology, would enjoy emotional support and sexual fulfillment in marriage. Women who remained single were depicted as “unnatural” for rejecting this

¹⁸⁵ Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values*, 61.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

opportunity, and their fate was an eternal “struggle with men for economic independence and political power.”¹⁸⁷

Accumulation of wealth and property won the middle class economic success and an illusion of control over their lives, while consumerism became the means in which the middle class sought to replicate the elite class’s demonstration of disposable income and commodity control. In this context, children were not economic assets as they were in agrarian societies but expensive, enjoyable commodities. Thus, the ability to plan for, produce, and provide for children became a mark of middle-class masculinity, and sex became a commodity to be consumed within marriage, where it could be controlled by men.¹⁸⁸ Family planning began to be represented in religious metanarratives as the salvific antidote to a world in need, due to the formation of a new myth of overpopulation and resource scarcity. In the early twentieth century, Baptist minister Harry Emerson Fosdick presented overpopulation of the world as the primary source of hunger and poverty. By producing similar myths of limited resources stretched thin across a bulging population, American churches who latched onto this narrative not only portrayed out-of-wedlock pregnancy or high pregnancy rates as the cause of dire straits for the entire world but also prevented inquiry into the unequal distribution of wealth and resources around the world.¹⁸⁹ This notion provided a rationale to the moral code of sexual purity outside of marriage beyond simply appealing to abstinence as God’s intent for single people.

¹⁸⁷ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “Discourses of Sexuality and Subjectivity: The New Woman: 1870-1936,” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Lesbian and Gay Past*, eds. Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: New American Library, 1989), 272.

¹⁸⁸ Jonathan Ned Katz, “The Invention of Heterosexuality,” 49.

¹⁸⁹ Brigitte C. Kamsler, ed., *Harry Emerson Fosdick Papers: 1900-1997*, (The Burke Library Archives, Columbia University Libraries, Union Theological Seminary, New York, August, 2015).

Although at first shocking to the Christian community, family planning soon became an acceptable and even encouraged practice, equated with proper Christian morality and care for children. In 1930, the Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops and other leaders passed a resolution that declared that within marriage, a couple could use contraception. Family planning, they argued, was a means of helping to make sure that children were loved and able to be cared for by their parents, lessening the likelihood that they would become a burden to and charge of the community.¹⁹⁰ Arguing that Protestants should use contraception to be more intentional about producing Christian families, evangelical leaders like Fosdick advocated for contraceptive use so that Christians would intentionally procreate only after achieving marital, spiritual, and financial stability, thus solidifying abstinence before marriage and contraception within marriage as central to Christian morality.¹⁹¹ This “responsible parenthood” movement urged parenting couples to recognize that a global crisis of exploding populations and limited food and resources was imminent, thus making the couple ethically bound to utilize contraceptive measures until or unless they were fully, economically, spiritually, and socially prepared and stable enough to provide for their children ample food and resources for well-being at the level of middle-class comfort.¹⁹² In such a way, restricting the exercise of women’s sexuality to the confines of marriage, along with the middle-class litmus test for “responsible parenting,” treats sexuality as a function of the human and female machine in need of management, which only operates properly within the patriarchal nuclear family. This thus promotes the management of women by men,

¹⁹⁰ “The Life and Witness of the Christian Community – Marriage,” (Lambeth Conference Resolutions 13, 14, and 15, August 17, 1930), www.anglicancommunion.org/resources/document-library/lambeth-conference/1930/resolution-15-the-life-and-witness-of-the-christian-community-marriage?author=Lambeth+Conference&year=1930

¹⁹¹ Brigitte C. Kamsler, ed., *Harry Emerson Fosdick Papers: 1900-1997*.

¹⁹² Samira Mehta, (paper presented at the American Academy of Religion Annual Conference, San Antonio, TX, November 20, 2016).

whereas the exercise of sexuality outside of a patriarchal relationship places the woman beyond control of the male manager.

Additionally, this “responsible parenthood” movement hinges upon the notion of children as the privatized responsibility of parents, and unmarried mothers and their children are cast as social liabilities that threaten the success of both the middle class and the United States. With a deontological notion of childrearing as free from government or community support, this metanarrative of responsible parenthood echoes the ethics and ideals of the capitalist system as privatized and in which government involvement is viewed not merely negatively but as an actual destructive threat. Through the responsible parenthood movement, the family became increasingly privatized and nuclear.

Furthermore, this metanarrative of responsible parenting and contraception added new angles to the shaming of out-of-wedlock pregnancy, as single mothers were viewed as ignorant, reckless, or selfishly disregarding the global crisis – since contraceptives were presumably available and family planning an ideal. To compound their shame, these women were seen as contributing to economic loss in society and the world by producing children who, with a single wage-earning mother as their head of household, may need the support of the community at large, a marker of dependency antithetical to the American Dream of autonomy and independence. Single mothers and their children threatened the accumulation of wealth in the United States by necessitating greater payouts for aid to women and children, thus opening the door for greater government involvement in an increasingly privatized system. As Sheila Rowbotham writes, such ideas gave rise to Western efforts “guided by the same ideological

conviction that families should bear all the cost and responsibility of children with no help from the rest of society.”¹⁹³

Finally, out-of-wedlock pregnancy endangered the myth of American exceptionalism and the ability of American systems and cultures to refine society, defined over and against the Global South. In the metanarrative of population growth as the cause of inequality, the problem, according to Samira Mehta, was framed as the Global South, while the solution was presented as the white, middle-class family of the Global North. The privileged white, middle-class family, whose married parents procreated at “appropriate” times within the confines of marriage and financial stability were construed as the paragon of Christian virtue, their apparent success cast as the inevitable outcome for those who played by the rules of capitalism, traditional gender roles, and conservative Christian morality. The single mother’s plight blurred the distinction between the Global North and Global South by encountering struggles akin to those who inhabited the Two-Thirds World. Additionally, single mothers represented the failure of the United States to compel all its women to conform to the nuclear family model and headship of men. These arguments served to further distance women from communities of support and entrench in Christian theology a gospel of sexual purity and privatized, individualized piety rather than social responsibility and communal bonds.

The Growth of Evangelicalism and a Christian (Capitalist) Nation

In the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries in the United States, “sanctification” as part and parcel of salvation, necessitating that the believer be “set apart” from this world and growing increasingly towards moral purity due to the indwelling Holy Spirit, became a staple of

¹⁹³ Sheila Rowbotham, *A Century of Women: The History of Women in Britain and the United States in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Viking, 1997), 553.

evangelical teaching and rhetoric, thus emphasizing the idea that Christians should live sinless lives. This differentiated from the doctrine of sanctification in mainline Protestant denominations such as Methodism, Presbyterianism, and Lutheranism in that it attached sanctification to salvation, not as a result of salvation but rather as a marker of true redemption, it emphasized the distance and difference between the Christian and “the world”, thus encouraging a dualistic worldview, and it encouraged close conformity to a particular code of purity and morality, as powered by the Holy Spirit. While this idea of sanctification apparently deviated from mainline Protestant theologies of sanctification, evangelicalism and its attendant view of sanctification certainly influenced and infiltrated all types of Christian communities, Protestant and Catholic alike.

According to William Martin, evangelicalism was especially strong in the southern United States, informing Southern culture, and was characterized by an absolute and unquestioning confidence in the Bible, an emphasis on purity and piety, and a passionate devotion to conversion and “winning souls.”¹⁹⁴ Interestingly, while personal piety became a staple of post-World War II evangelicalism, this vein of Christianity has roots not only in fundamentalism but also in the Social Gospel movement of the early 19th century. In this movement, many Christians were convinced that they were responsible for ushering in a millennium of peace and prosperity that would close with the return of Christ. In order to bring this about, Christians were to end war, slavery, drinking, poverty, oppression of women and other minority groups, prostitution, and even card-playing.¹⁹⁵ Significantly, this movement was sponsored by a group of wealthy New York businessmen known as the Association of

¹⁹⁴ William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America*, 4.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

Gentlemen. As Martin notes, every major evangelist after Charles Finney has had the patronage of wealthy business people who support the ministry as a means of accomplishing their religious and social goals.¹⁹⁶ The American evangelical movement from the 1800s to the present has thus been inextricably tied to those with wealth in the late-market capitalist economy. Finney further sets the tone for American evangelicalism by placing the impetus upon all Christian converts to reform the world, or, as Martin asserts, to “engage in a grand effort to save the republic, and, with it, the world,” as they are “driven by the desire to present their Heavenly Father with the Righteous Empire he [*sic*] obviously intended America to be...”¹⁹⁷ Inspired by the ethos of Finney, the Social Gospel, and America’s role in a divine cosmic plan, President Franklin D. Roosevelt utilized these ideas to give wings to his New Deal. But as the United States entered into an era of rapid industrialization and globalization, many strands of Christianity such as evangelicalism became marked with anxiety regarding the protection of the unique and holy identity of the United States amongst all other nations, and personal piety and purity became a vehicle for the lay Christian’s responsibility to maintain the sanctity of America.

While Finney believed that American society was in fact improving due to the efforts of Social Gospel adherents to end slavery, to campaign for alcohol prohibition, and to advocate for better treatment of women and the poor, another strand of Christian evangelicalism became popular in the United States. This strand, of which Dwight L. Moody was a prominent figurehead, held that the world was in fact not improving and that Christ’s return was the only hope for its transformation.¹⁹⁸ Whereas Finney’s movement and other mainline churches during

¹⁹⁶ William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America*, 5.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁹⁸ William Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 7

his time believed it incumbent upon them to invest time and resources into social services, Moody's brand of evangelicalism focused on personal relationships with God. Of the latter, Martin asserts that this not only offered believers hope in dismal social times but also curbed efforts to better society through social services and activism, due to the belief that these initiatives were "fruitless attempts to thwart God's plan for human history."¹⁹⁹ However, this view actually demonizes those who suffer because their struggles are viewed as a result of the world's worsening condition and evidence of its need for help beyond human capabilities, a rescue only God can perform.

Due to the disruptions of the Great Depression, the World Wars, and the rise of communism, America developed a certain paranoia regarding the well-being of its youth. In response to this, evangelist Billy Graham emerged on the scene, preaching a "virile, athletic, victorious, freedom-creating Christ" as the necessary means of reestablishing America's roots.²⁰⁰ His main message in the early days of his ministry was the danger of communism as Satan's way of getting hold of the United States and the alternative way of Christ for which the United States was created:

Western culture and its fruits had its foundation in the Bible, the Word of God, and in the revivals of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. Communism, on the other hand, has decided against God, against Christ, against the Bible, and against all religion. Communism is not only an economic interpretation of life – communism is a religion that is inspired, directed, and motivated by the Devil himself who has declared war against the Almighty God.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America*, 7.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 29.

²⁰¹ Quoted in William Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 29.

Like Finney's and Moody's proximity to wealthy business persons, Graham became closely allied with political and economic power, a move from which he would later step back after the impeachment of Richard Nixon. However, he continued to celebrate the late-market, free-enterprise economic system in the United States as "the development and use of God-given natural resources by men [*sic*] who have built a great new empire."²⁰² Therefore, any policy or practice that opposed or diverged from the encouraged practices of the American free-market, privatized system was considered to be influenced by communism and thus a threat to the United States, morality, and Christianity itself. In Martin's historical reconstructing of the rise of the Christian right, he recounts that government aid was thought to substitute individualistic dependence on self-discipline, hard work, and free enterprise with reliance upon the government. In this light, Roosevelt's New Deal was recast as the beginning of the America's susceptibility to Soviet takeover and moral decline, and subsequent efforts towards communitarian, non-privatized ideals have been, according to this ideology, equated with evil, anti-Christian, and anti-American sensibilities.

The paranoia over the moral condition and safety of American youth only grew with the social movements and rapidly changing culture of the mid-20th century. The middle class felt their benefit from the power structure that privileged white, male, American workers to be threatened by the increasingly globalized world and by the redistribution of and inclusion into power of women and ethnic minorities through events like the Civil Rights Movement and the first and second waves of the Women's Movement. While the middle class lacks the power of the elite class in this system, they in fact benefit from it far greater than the working classes, the poor, women, and marginalized ethnic minorities. However, power in neoliberalism is cast as

²⁰² Quoted in William Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 30.

hierarchical, so that power is always tied to domination of the other. Thus, although compared to the power of the elite class, the middle class has more in common with marginalized populations, the middle class sided with the interests of the elite class to maintain the traditional flow of power, therefore maintaining their position over and above the marginalized. Many in the middle class felt they benefited from neoliberalism and policies that promoted patriarchy, classism, racism, and the nuclear family to the detriment of other alternatives because the operative metanarrative promised that those who received economic benefits *deserved* these due to their hard work and conformity to the system's rules. Additionally, they bought into the metanarratives of morality of this system that chalked struggles up to a lack of conformity to the norms of white, patriarchal America, and they preferred to believe that they had status and power akin to the elite class. To believe otherwise was to admit that *they* were dominated, that they were less successful than they thought, and that their "earnings" were not the pure result of their hard work but rather functioned as "hush money," in a sense, to keep them performing necessary tasks to support the system in place.

Prominent American evangelicals such as Billy Graham began openly endorsing political candidates who espoused favor of the privatized free market, the importance of the patriarchal nuclear family, American exceptionalism, and the centrality of personal purity and piety. The aforementioned tenets loosely comprise popular concepts of "family values", a term at the fore of both conservative politics and evangelical Christian rhetoric. Graham himself warned of "Satanic evils of communism, the God-blessed superiority of the free-enterprise system, and the need to return to the old-fashioned values and virtues of individualist America."²⁰³ Therefore, any policy or practice that diverged from the practices of American free-market capitalism and

²⁰³ Quoted in William Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 30.

privatization, including government aid, was considered a threat to the United States, morality, and Christianity itself. At the same time, Christian narratives of sexual purity, conservative economics, the nuclear family, and American exceptionalism pinned the blame for negative social changes like rising poverty, crime, abortion, divorce, and out-of-wedlock pregnancy – on groups that did not conform to social norms. Amongst these non-conforming populations were single mothers.

Significantly, during the 1960s, a new trend in the historical study of families and sociology contended that in preindustrial England, extended families were rare and that the nuclear family was the dominant structure in this region as long ago as the 13th century. According to these scholars, families were heavily child-centered and smaller due to the older ages of brides. At this time, contends this view, men and women married later because they needed to save enough money to establish independent households; thus, children were born into families that had already established the values of hard work and monetary savings, thus giving rise to an “urbanized middle class.”²⁰⁴ This scholarship lent credence to the notion that the nuclear family structure has both a long history in Western civilization and also is deeply engrained in the fibers of capitalist, Western culture. However, historian Steven Ruggles, disagrees with these findings. He argues that while this trend in historical and family studies claimed that the extended family was never a norm in Western society and that the nuclear family was always the ideal, census records reveal that a form of extended family structure was actually dominant in the Global West in the 18th and 19th centuries and only became increasingly

²⁰⁴ Kay Hymowitz, “The Real Roots of the Nuclear Family,” *Family Studies: The Blog of the Institute for Family Studies*. December 23, 2013, <http://Family-studies.org/the-real-roots-of-the-nuclear-family/>

rare in the 20th.²⁰⁵ Additionally, using the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, a national historical census database, Ruggles reveals that the number of white households consisting of a married couple and their children has declined in every year since 1880. Furthermore, between the years of 1880 and 1940, the percentage of extended-family households was actually stable, but then met with a decline after World War II.²⁰⁶ These statistics are consistent with the theory that the building of the metanarrative of the moral propriety of the nuclear family structure and its centrality to American civil religion increased in fervor and power in the post-war era; it also reveals the dissonance between the proposed normative ideal and reality in the United States.

One of the strangest turns in the equation of social services with communism arose in the 1960s with the fight over sex education, a battle that continues today and directly affects ideas about and treatment of single mothers. In the 1960s in some areas of the United States, public schools were beginning to offer comprehensive sex education classes to middle and high school students. However, a resistance movement, led by conservative Catholic and concerned mother Eleanor Howe and the California Citizens Committee, protested this instruction. At a workshop for parents of children in the California public school system, this group screened a film called *Pavlov's Children*, which insisted that Russian communists, through aid organizations like UNESCO, were using "Pavlovian conditioning techniques" in sex education courses to weaken America's youth to totalitarianism.²⁰⁷ Some members of the committee believed that those who advocated sex education for youth were communists, and others insisted that Satan was using both communists and sex education classes to attack the United States and its Christians.

²⁰⁵ Steven Ruggles, "The Transformation of the American Family Structure," *The American Historical Review*, 1994, <http://users.hist.umn.edu/~ruggles/Articles/AHR.pdf>, (accessed April 4, 2016).

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ William Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 107.

Eventually, savvy utilization of media by this committee and its supporters forced the school district superintendent's resignation and influenced a law that eradicated sex education in California public schools, despite an overwhelming 80% of Anaheim students whose parents gave them permission to take sex education courses.²⁰⁸

What is resoundingly significant about this case is that through organizing against sex education, conservative Christians in the United States – an overwhelming amount of whom were women – were learning that they had the power to influence politics and society, regardless of their numbers or popularity. However, while these women were becoming empowered by these movements, their empowerment came at the expense of other women – namely, single mothers. The anti-sex education position argued that knowledge about sex will entice youth to want to engage in it, which will inevitably lead to unwanted pregnancies, the moral decline of the United States and its Christians, and thus the decline of America's status and power, read as a divine reward for its goodness. Here we can see the elision between economic success in the market system, individual purity and piety, and the sanctity of the United States as it intersects with concepts of sexual morality and family structure. On the other hand, we can also recognize the damning confluence of anti-communitarian sentiment, Christian skepticism about and opposition to social services, and the demonization of sex as it is experienced by single mothers who might benefit from alternative ideologies.

Of course, not all Christians and Americans protested sex education. Some, such as Harold Leif, a leader in the movement to institute responsible comprehensive sex education, contended that knowledge about sex encourages responsibility and emotional maturity, whereas

²⁰⁸ William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America*, 113.

the “just say no to premarital sex” model is not effective.²⁰⁹ However, Leif’s organization SIECUS believed that the context of the 1960s in which the sex education movement arose contributed to the anxiety over it. Sex education was lumped into cautionary tales about the Vietnam War, student protests, riots, assassinations, and other social turmoil experienced in the United States and beyond during this era; this was just one more change that seemed terrifying, drastic, and threatening.²¹⁰ To ease the fears of Christians, SIECUS formed the Center for Sex and Religion to help churches address sexuality in effective ways. According to Leif, “It [was] mainly the fundamentalist churches that [...] tried to demonize sex education and claim [sex education advocates] were in league with Satan.”²¹¹ Other churches showed themselves amenable to conversations about sex.

These debates over sex education created a viable platform for Jimmy Carter’s presidential campaign in the 1970s, since the anxiety regarding unplanned pregnancy and unmarried parenting was growing. Carter marketed himself as the great patriarch of the United States, a family guy who viewed this nation as his brothers, sisters, and children and who believed that the family unit would be the salvific force for all social ills plaguing America. As Carter’s chief adviser on domestic affairs, Stuart Eizenstal, commented about Carter, “Somehow the notion of a man grounded in solid family and religious values gave a certain amount of confidence that this was the kind of person who could do the healing the American people expected in the wake of Watergate.”²¹² Carter spoke frequently about how knowing that his

²⁰⁹ William Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 114.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 114-115.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

²¹² Quoted in William Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 148.

mother and father were always present together and for him created the comfort and stability he enjoyed in his childhood and that led to success throughout his life.²¹³ Carter and his supporters frequently made appeals to Christian support for the male-headed nuclear family, as well as Christian support for late capitalism and conservative politics. In fact, during this period, America saw an increase in evangelicals' openly endorsing particular candidates who espoused favor of privatized business, the free market, the importance of the nuclear family, both hard and soft forms of patriarchy, American exceptionalism, and the centrality of personal purity and piety. Examples of the intertwining of Christianity, family ideals, and American conservatism in politics, society, and economics abound. For example, the Christian Freedom Foundation was established after World War II to promote "Christian economics" but shifted directions in the 1970s to promote the unity of evangelical Christianity and conservative politics.²¹⁴ In another example, a group known as the Intercessors for America sent letters to 120,000 clergymen in 1975 urging them to order educational materials that would teach them how to dominate local precincts and "elect godly Christians to political office."²¹⁵ And in 1976, Citizens for Carter placed a full-page ad in *Christianity Today* that read, "...As an evangelical you can play an important part in this restoration of confidence...America's problems are the result of a spiritual crisis at its heart."²¹⁶ In this brief statement, the ad conveys that any problem, real or imagined, that cuts against conservative ideals (and in the case of this project, we are especially concerned

²¹³ William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America*, 148.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

with single motherhood) is a spiritual problem, a mortal flaw in one's relationship with God and practice of one's faith.

President Carter's campaign marks the first time that a presidential candidate in the United States made the condition of the family a primary focus of her or his platform, a practice that would become a staple in campaign rhetoric in the ensuing decades. According to Carter, the rise in the number of families that deviated from the two-parent, male-headed structure was a major cause for concern for America as a nation, and a restoration of the primacy and importance of this structure was touted as the messianic salve for this wound. Carter argued that the U.S. government should make strengthening the American family its most urgent priority.²¹⁷ When he referred to strengthening the family, he was speaking about encouraging a particular *type* of family structure rather than supporting the health of the interpersonal relationships within the family or increasing the access to resources for thriving available to a variety of family structures. He made comments that "the American family is in trouble" and that "the root of the problem [of instability and loss of values in our lives] is the steady erosion and weakening of our families."²¹⁸ He argued that the rise in divorce rates, unwed motherhood, and children living with one parent, along with the decline of the extended family in the United States, correlated with the rise in juvenile crime, children living in foster homes, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicide.²¹⁹ According to Carter, a reinvigoration of family values, rooted in the married mother-father structure and privatized family, economic, and religious systems, would be the salvation of

²¹⁷ William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America*, 155.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

the United States, ordained by God. The appeals to religion lent authority and legitimacy to the political encouragement of the privatized, male-headed middle-class nuclear family structure.

Carter's campaign also proposed several changes that would benefit single mothers in many of the very ways that they were most vulnerable. For one, Carter pledged to institute a national daycare program and work for a national healthcare program, and he proposed that each federal program should present a "family impact statement" to show how it would affect American families, including female-headed ones.²²⁰ Unfortunately, none of these came to pass under Carter, and while they would have benefited single mothers, the vilification of these women was kept intact by additional policies such as the reformation of the tax system in ways that encouraged parents to marry and stay together. In fact, the Child and Family Services Act of 1975 was defeated under Carter's administration when the fundamentalist Christian groups propagandized that this act would grant exorbitant power to a government that desired to take children from their parents and make sure that these children were not taught about Christianity – even though some of the strongest supporters and main initiators of this act were part of the U.S. Catholic Conference and the United Methodist Church. The act would have provided \$1.9 billion in federal funds for day care services, prenatal care, parent training, medical care for handicapped children, and more.²²¹ Furthermore, Carter issued a statement claiming that "the family unit is the best way for men and women to live their lives, the best way to raise children, and the only solid foundation upon which to build a strong nation."²²² This clear dismissal of alternative concepts of family and social organization and this mystification of a family structure

²²⁰ William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America*, 155.

²²¹ Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women*, (New York: Free Press, 2004), 246-247.

²²² William Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 155.

over the substance of the family as a relational unit echoes the evangelical ethos of the day that continues to impact single mothers in Christian circles, contemporary societies, and global landscapes.

The Postmodern Era: 1980s to Present Day

If President Jimmy Carter made family values synonymous with the nuclear family structure, President Ronald Reagan ushered in an era in which the equation of the nuclear family structure with American and Christian morality and economic prosperity reached its zenith. The Reagan administration and the culture that supported this administration built a metanarrative centered upon a particular idea of American freedom that demanded individual, private control and decision-making power. According to Wendy Brown, political scientist at the University of California, Berkeley, America has, throughout its history, lauded a number of differing concepts of freedom, but since the mid-1970s, the predominant idea of freedom has revolved around free enterprise and individual self-determination, free of state interference.²²³ Significantly, this concept of freedom has decidedly economic implications and is intertwined with neoliberalism, the centralizing of power in a small elite class and the support of a culture determined by this class' social norms, including but not limited to competition, domination, privatization, free trade, and deregulation, even as it acts upon the family to privatize and atomize it into nuclear units that stand apart from the community. As Valerie Lehr, author of *Queer Family Values: Debunking the Myth of the Nuclear Family* and gender studies scholar, asserts, the aforementioned notion of freedom assumes that we are free when we do not feel power

²²³ Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

operating, but power is always operating.²²⁴ In this case, power benefits the male-headed nuclear family structure and ultimately appears to prop up a social, economic, and political system in which those with the most decision-making power are predominantly white, married, heterosexual men who occupy high positions in global corporations and other international and national enterprises.

A staple of the conservative metanarrative that prevented policies and cultural changes to develop that would better support single mothers and their children was the image of the “welfare mother.” Prior to Reagan’s presidency, the *New Yorker* ran an article on such “welfare mothers” – predominantly single mothers who relied on welfare for their and their children’s survival. Focusing on a Latina unmarried mother of nine children, this article said that its subject, Carmen Santana, was “lazy” and known to hit her children when they annoyed her. According to the article, Santana was emblematic of all welfare mothers in that she “never [gives] much thought to the future” and “makes little effort to dominate circumstances.” Furthermore, the *New Yorker* article mentions that Ms. Santana’s mother had three children by three different men. The point of this piece was to argue that Ms. Santana and her mother are proof that welfare produces a cycle of poverty that generates promiscuity, irresponsibility, dependency, bad parenting, and negligence. In their book *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women*, Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels point out that this article’s audience likely had no real knowledge of poverty themselves, thus rendering the metanarrative of recipients of welfare and single mothers as lazy, bad parents with no ambition or ethics powerfully effective in converting ignorant middle-class readers to this opinion as well. As Douglas and Michaels write, “[During] the 1980s and the 1990s, politicians and the news media

²²⁴ Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values*, 15.

would cast welfare not as something that happened to women often because of circumstances beyond their control, but rather as a way of life certain women actively – even avidly – chose.”²²⁵

During the era of Reagan’s, George H.W. Bush’s, and even Democrat Bill Clinton’s administrations, media coverage of welfare increased, but only 10% of the sources for reports on welfare were actual welfare recipients.²²⁶ What is more, this shift in the attention of the culture – including media, evangelical and fundamentalist Christian circles, American civil religion, and other aspects of civil society – towards the dangers of non-nuclear families and female-headed households justified shifts in public policy from combatting poverty to fighting welfare – and eventually to battling “welfare mothers” and their offspring.²²⁷

In reality, during the early 1990s, the vast majority of adults who received government aid left welfare within a couple of years. Statistics show that 75% of adults on government aid in the early 1990s received assistance for only two years or less, and half of all single mothers on welfare worked while receiving government aid. Furthermore, teenage mothers made up only a small, even negligible percentage of mothers receiving public assistance, yet, as Douglas and Michaels point out, politicians, the media, and certain religious groups claimed that teen pregnancy was the rule rather than the exception for those on welfare.²²⁸ The social stigma surrounding single motherhood and its connection to teenage pregnancy became a popular topic of concern and anxiety during the 1980s and 1990s. Often, arguments against government

²²⁵ Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth*, 173-175.

²²⁶ Ibid., 180.

²²⁷ Ibid., 176.

²²⁸ Ibid., 177-178.

assistance for unmarried mothers claimed that welfare bred a lack of responsibility inimical to the American and Protestant work ethic and thus encouraged young women to engage in promiscuity because welfare provided an unearned safety net that removed the consequences of poverty that might discourage premarital sex. In fact, *Reader's Digest* ran an article that stated that many welfare mothers deliberately got pregnant out of wedlock to get money from the government.²²⁹ By this point of view, welfare produces single mothers, who then continue the cycle of poverty and thus single parenthood by raising similarly dependent and irresponsible offspring.

Other arguments allege that rather than welfare creating single mothers, single mothers are a particular brand of human who lack morality and work ethic, and the welfare system rewards these women and gives them the resources to have more children, who will then be raised with a similar disregard for hard work, religious and moral devotion, and national pride. Reflecting on the attention given to single motherhood and welfare in the 1980s and 1990s, Douglas and Michaels maintain that “[the] poor mother no longer represented the failings of American society to take care of its own. She represented the failure of individual women to take their maternal responsibilities as seriously as possible.”

Additionally, Douglas and Michaels argue that the stigma that targeted single mothers during this era arose from a reaction to the strides made by the Second and burgeoning Third Waves of feminism for women's liberation and for the challenging of patriarchy. In a reaction to feminism and the “counterculture” of the 1960s and 1970s, some segments of society sought to fuel a reactionary or restrictionist social movement. This included a return to the preference for male-headship of families and for women's roles as mothers and wives. By lauding marriage and

²²⁹ Quoted in Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth*, 178.

childbearing as integral to American success and recovery from the tumultuous previous decades and as basic to Christian morality, this metanarrative made single mothers' economic struggles a foil for the success of married couples' financial security under Reagan's late-market capitalism and Bush and Clinton's development of the free market. Thus, single mothers were enemies to America's response to the drug culture, poverty, crime, amorality, and atheism that supposedly resulted from the rebellion of American youth against the United States and its social, political, economic, and religious systems. As Douglas and Michaels write, for this new "momism" that celebrates the married, stay-at-home mom "to work as a new norm, there had to be delinquents who dramatized what happened to those who failed to comply, delinquents other mothers could feel comfortable about putting in detention."²³⁰ Single mothers and their economic plight filled those metaphorical detention halls.

Interestingly, as the gender stereotypes and identities within the nuclear family are challenged in the postmodern era and Third Wave of the feminist movement, the centrality of this nuclear structure in society is actually reinscribed. For example, the increased autonomy and agency afforded to women through the accessibility and acceptability of reproductive rights and birth control has also led to attitudes of judgment and condescension toward, along with a reluctance to assist and support, women who experience unplanned pregnancies. In her book *Queer Family Values: Debunking the Myth of the Nuclear Family*, Valerie Lehr offers a similar critique of the ambivalence of this development for women as it impacts the metanarrative of the nuclear family structure and single mothers. She argues that, "[in] a sense, the increased ability to choose when to have children has [...reinforced] a discourse of blame that controls those who

²³⁰ Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth*, 177.

become pregnant without ‘choosing’ to do so.”²³¹ What is more, the movement for LGBTQ marriage rights also has served to idealize the marital relationship and the nuclear family structure of a married couple with their children. Lehr writes that the metanarrative of family today consists of “values and assumptions that are historically rooted in the development and consolidation of liberal industrial capitalism in the early 1900s,” an idea which we will discuss further in the next chapter. Lehr challenges these values that guide our concepts of family, arguing that they are intrinsically contextual and thus obsolete today, and identifies these values as harmful to the LGBTQ community in the past; however, Lehr notes that while the LGBTQ community may be able to conform to these values today, other groups are now harmed and excluded by them, for they are values such as power, financial success, and privatization that privilege only a few.²³² According to Lehr’s argument, the push for marriage rights for the LGBTQ community reinforces the metanarrative of the idealization of the marital family and admits more previously-marginalized persons into the exclusive privileges reserved for the married. What is problematic is that the LGBTQ community has been a force for challenging harmful and exclusionary policies and practices in our culture; does their focus on winning marital rights bolster the idea that “successful integration into power [requires] adaptation to and acceptance of dominant norms of family and sexuality,” as Lehr writes?²³³

In looking at the histories of family and social structures across the globe and even just in the United States, it is clear that there is no singular notion of family that has been universally regarded as the ideal. Instead, the metanarratives have shifted over time and often reflect

²³¹ Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values*, 3-4.

²³² Ibid., 45.

²³³ Ibid., p. 65.

practices and arrangements that will preserve the power structure and distribution of power in any given society for that particular time. The single mother presents a challenge and a problematic to the metanarrative of patriarchal roles. In this social imaginary, women are seen to be in need of protection – ironically, not *from* the system that oppresses them, violates and objectifies them, and perpetuates the feminization of poverty but *because* their nature renders them soft, weak, emotional, and incapable of supporting themselves and their families without the assistance of a male spouse. In popular culture, the single mother is depicted as overworked, struggling, and unfulfilled, though she may be shown as possessing a fierce, almost pitiable love for and devotion to her child, from whom she must inevitably require too much maturity and autonomy. While this image certainly has its basis in reality, the common response to this scenario is to introduce the messianic male who, by marrying the woman, delivers her and her child from her plight and erases the ignominy of her situation. Thus, the *mistake*, the *sin*, lies in the woman (or the abandoning male) who bore a child out of wedlock – not on the systemic evils that make it inordinately difficult for a single parent to provide for her family, achieve her own self-actualization, and contribute to society. To allege that single mothers struggle not because of their nonconformity to social norms but because of a skewed society, economy, and culture that was built to benefit only a few would issue a challenge to the neoliberal system would undercut and demystify the metanarrative, the myth, of the American Dream and capitalism. Furthermore, it would destabilize the accompanying prosperity gospel that claims that with hard work, faith, and loyal devotion to the laws of the country and the “laws of God”, one is free to achieve anything.

Conclusion

Through a particular interpretation of gender and of Christianity, the injustice of the economic system that causes suffering and objectification of women is authorized through discourses that uphold these experiences of women as “natural” or even divinely ordained. The metanarratives at play are the confluence of the “gospel of capitalism”, the elevation of the patriarchal nuclear family as a sacred Christian institution, and myths of U.S. exceptionalism. Shame, exclusion from decision-making power, silencing, and economic hardship suffered by unmarried mothers are attributed to the transgression of “God’s will.” This alleged transgression thereby serves as justification for omitting unmarried mothers from the benefits of our socioeconomic-political systems and also operates as a means of masking the patriarchal and hegemonic nature of the sovereign economic system that determines who shares in power and prosperity. Lehr proposes that in order to effectively challenge the “fictional narrative of American identity” painted by entities that attempt to preserve the current unequal distribution of power requires that we combine political battles for rights with cultural battles. In other words, we must understand the important role that dominant constructs of “acceptable family and sexuality” play in politics and policies.²³⁴ Therefore, it is not only vital to expose the interests behind the shaping of the traditional nuclear family ideal but also to explore counternarratives available in theology that might potentially be mobilized to change cultural values and perspectives and to garner wider-spread support for alternative social networks, thus producing change for justice and equality.

²³⁴ Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values*, 105.

Lehr contends that change is most likely to be effective when it is a result of cultural norms. Our ability to counter hegemonic and exclusionary metanarratives of American identity requires the recognition that fighting political battles for rights alone is inadequate and must be combined with cultural battles. We can fight these with an understanding of the importance that dominant constructions of acceptable family structures and sexuality, often perpetuated by dominant theologies, play in politics and policy-making.²³⁵ Thus, theology is an important tool for shaping ideals and norms, as well as persuading ideological transformation and inspiring social action to convert earthly situations to align with new ideals articulated by counter-theologies that challenge existing metanarratives and realities. Dominant evangelical theologies as they currently exist may have the ability to empower individual women on some level, but they are not fomenting action to eradicate harmful and oppressive practices for single mothers as a whole. One of the main reasons for this is that Christianity in many forms is inextricably intertwined with the power dynamics of the world at large, and one of the main determinants of power in our world is economics. When religion takes for granted the flow of power through our economic system as something incontrovertible and natural – or even divinely ordained, it becomes a sort of civil religion that, in this case, preserves patriarchy, class-based oppression, and racism in this neoliberal iteration. Furthermore, it divinizes or mythologizes neoliberal capitalism as the way things ought to be and the path to success and holiness, and it makes this economic model a central feature of American culture and of Christianity. What is needed are counternarratives – alternative theologies and practices – that destabilize this relationship between Christianity, neoliberal economics, patriarchy, and power.

²³⁵ Ibid., 105.

In this next chapter, we will analyze the experiences of a number of single mothers within the Christian church in the United States and explore how their personal stories, their sources of support, and the messages they are receiving from their faith communities yield insights into whether or not the metanarrative of the nuclear family structure has significant economic repercussions, or even economic rationales, that belie male privilege and victimize single mothers. Furthermore, we will look for alternative theologies and practices arising from their experiences and stories that may provide grounds for counternarratives that could challenge the cultural and constructed theological links between male headship, the nuclear family, and morality or Christianity – and thus contest the economic and political systems that have given birth to the preference of the privatized nuclear family.

CHAPTER 4: LIVING UNDER THE METANARRATIVE: AMERICAN EVANGELICAL SINGLE MOTHERS AND THE STATISTICAL AND NARRATIVE REALITIES OF THEIR LIVES

In Jerry Falwell's book, *If I Should Die Before I Wake*, the conservative evangelist appears to offer a unique take on unplanned pregnancy from a Christian leader that seeks not to vilify the expectant mothers but to offer them, in a sense, redemption. The hope and salvation presented to unmarried women experiencing pregnancy comes in the form of his maternity home, where the women will be counseled to choose adoption for their babies. As the book explains, Falwell was inspired to found the maternity home and write the book as a counteraction to abortion. Indeed, Falwell does not demonize the expectant women but instead depicts them as victims – of a sinful culture and world, of low self-esteem, and of predatory men. Falwell's tactic is to depict the women whose stories are featured in his book as innocent victims of shameful acts and of sinful pressures and temptations that have preyed upon their naivete and insecurities. His approach, given the dearth of Christian texts on single motherhood altogether and given the historical depiction of out-of-wedlock pregnancy as a marker of the operation of evil in our midst, is certainly novel. If he were to shame these women, he would be reproducing the logic that he believes drives many to choose abortion, and I believe that he is correct in identifying shame as a contributing factor to some women's selection of abortion. However, what he leaves in place and in fact reproduces in his text is the shaming of single mothers who opt to raise their children without a marital partner, as well as the myth that single mothers are spiritually broken by sin and stand in need of spiritual restoration mediated by an outside entity.

Demonstrating the first point – that Falwell reproduces the shaming of unmarried women who opt to raise their children, Falwell’s co-author, herself a resident of the maternity home, relates a conversation she overhears between one of the counselors and another expectant mother:

Rosemary [the counselor] tells Missy [the expectant mother], ‘You love your baby too much to keep her. You don’t have a home or a family or a husband to offer your baby. You can’t provide anything you want her to have. [...] There is a young couple right this minute who cannot have a baby of their own. They have a good income. They have a beautiful home with a nursery and toys and baby clothes and an empty cradle. They are praying for a baby, Missy. They can take care of the baby. They can give the baby what you want to give her.’²³⁶

Incidentally, according to Jennifer, the co-author, this conversation marks the moment that she decided to put her own child up for adoption. What the counselor indicates – and what Jennifer apparently believes – is that neither Missy’s love for her child nor her desire to give her baby a good life is enough. As Susan Friend Harding notes in her analysis of *If I Should Die Before I Wake*, the stories of the women who graduate from the maternity home and choose to raise their children themselves are tales of sadness and struggle, in which the children are the victims, while the women who adopt their children out are blessed. Those who choose to keep and raise their children themselves are cast in a different light. For example, the son of one young mother who works full-time “must spend long hours in daycare,” while the woman’s own “adolescence ends too early,” and another young woman is said to have taken her baby back home to her abusive father’s house, her fate uncertain.²³⁷ According to *If I Should Die Before I Wake*, the marker of health and blessing is access to middle-class comforts. This is the trump card that Rosemary plays with Missy to convince her (and Jennifer) that they could not possibly

²³⁶ Susan Friend Harding, “The Pro-Life Gospel,” *Nothing Sacred: Women Respond to Religious Fundamentalism and Terror*, ed. Betsey Reed, (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2002), 300.

²³⁷ Ibid., 300.

be good parents to their children, regardless of their love and efforts for their children.

Significantly, Rosemary never mentions the hypothetical adoptive parents' character, parenting skills, or actual love for the child, yet their class status – the ability to provide material comforts available to the middle-class – and their marital status are somehow equated with Christian righteousness, as Rosemary's conjectures that they are praying for a child. At the same time, Rosemary implicitly dismisses the value of Missy's own faith and prayers for her child.

While Falwell attempts to separate unplanned pregnancy from the stigma of shame that often meets women in Christian circles, he presents no theology that challenges the patriarchal mentalities that problematize female-headed households, nor any ideas that dispute the idolization of virginity, the actual vilification of out-of-wedlock sex and pregnancy, or the privileging of two-parent, male-headed households that results in the shaming and struggling of single mothers. What he does do is promote an alternative to abortion – adoption – that remains consistent with the prevailing ideal in many Christian circles of the male-headed nuclear family structure, and his tactics to present the pregnant women as innocent and perhaps ignorant victims is not a theological or philosophical move but rather a strategy that will free them from the fear of being cast as a villain while pregnant and thus dissuade them from choosing abortion to avoid stigmatization. However, to parent alone, according to Falwell's argumentation, is to assert one's self (if female) into a role that God never desired – and the ultimate victim will be the child, the stamp of suffering being the inaccessibility of the middle-class ideal for the single mother. The ultimate sign of love and selflessness for one's child is, according to this text, to make a middle-class life available to the child, which can only be possible, says Falwell, through the two-parent family.

What Falwell's book indicates is what too little research has explored and what too few efforts to support single mothers recognize: that a strong connection exists between the metanarrative of the preferability and privileging of the two-parent nuclear family and the struggles of single mothers, a connection which implies a systemic injustice benefiting a patriarchal economic and class structure. Although some Christian communities do attempt to mitigate the shame that single mothers feel – often by forming single-parent support groups or ministries or by explaining unplanned pregnancy or divorce as a sin equal to all others, little to no attention is given to the experience of daily struggles and pressures that single mothers face categorically and in disproportion not only to married parents but even to single fathers. The attention that is given to these situations is often either spiritualized or individualized – or, we might say privatized – so that single mothers may not develop the collective consciousness and identity necessary to realize the systemic causes of their struggles and thus form collective responses to them.

Furthermore, single mothers are assimilated into the operative metanarratives of Christianities – through theologizing about sin and redemption, through creating spaces for single mothers within congregations, through generally accepting single mothers into churches. Yet they are still kept at a distance from the resources that are crucial to generate the power necessary to formulate and challenge theologies and to take on prominent leadership roles. These resources include material support in the form of affordable childcare and healthcare, gender-egalitarian pay and a living wage, and reasonable and consistent work schedules that recognize a single mother's parenting duties. Additionally, they include opportunities for education, spaces that welcome questions and challenges to accepted or orthodox ideas, political inclusion, decision-making power, and leadership positions. Single mothers are welcome to be Christian by

conforming to the metanarratives in operation, but they cannot question the metanarratives. Because much is at stake for single mothers – namely, the well-being of their children, they cannot afford to be complete outsiders or willful rebels but must find a way into acceptance, and in so doing, these women must often accept the oppressiveness of a patriarchal society supported by the theologies of their churches. At the same time, their potential resources for thriving – alternative theologies, communal rather than privatized social organization, and the right to engage in the political system for better policies for single mothers – are often eroded. As M. Gail Hamner observes, many dominant American evangelicalisms deploy hierarchy to limit “horizontal”, disparate interpretations of the Bible and theology, appealing to scriptural authority, so these evangelicalisms may reject the potential good of internal dissension and the reality of contestation. According to Hamner, this is especially pertinent in our discussion of female-headed households because the church “coheres in its obedience around the nostalgic attraction of ‘traditional family values,’ a nostalgia that directly or indirectly works to keep women, children, and racial minorities subordinated to white male adults.” The operation of what Michel Foucault called biopower – a politics that manifests as the production and management of life – employs institutions including religion to govern, regulate, discipline, and control citizens to benefit neoliberal, patriarchal, white-dominated empire and elite. I contend that dominant Christian theologies that support heteronormativity, complementarianism, and the nuclear family structure are “proven” to be preferable, true, or godly by the general tendency for two-parent, male-headed families to be more economically stable than female-headed families. This echoes Lyotard’s theory of the mercantilization of knowledge, in which Lyotard explains that contemporary knowledge tends to be produced by those with the most economic power and the financial means to “test” this knowledge. Because this knowledge is tested by methods

developed by those with a vested interest in proving its “truth” and in environments created by those in power, this “knowledge” usually is proven true by these “echo chamber” sorts of tests. In a sense, knowledge is sold to the highest bidder in cultures created by these same high bidders.²³⁸ In the case of theologies of the nuclear family and sexual purity, economic prosperity is depicted as a neutral opportunity open to those with the self-control and ambition to take steps and precautions necessary to achieve it, including performing gendered duties in complement to a marriage partner of the opposite sex. Overlooked is the fact that this economic system is created in the service of patriarchal power, which impedes women’s access to and control of this same power and which refuses to share this power equally amongst all persons. The patriarchal family structure has shaped up to maintain this, and those who conform may receive the benefits of economic success – though not necessarily power itself. In other words, the neoliberal capitalist system is the latest determinant of who has power and the current insurer of patriarchal domination. The nuclear family structure has arisen in service to this, and single mothers stand as threats to this system, having historically been depicted as deviants and dangers to patriarchal power.

However, despite the press of biopower, single mothers themselves form a sort of surplus that resists the biopower of empire. In *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe the political nature of what they call “multitude” lying in its identity not as a group delineated by a shared identity or even by unity but rather by “what it has in common.”²³⁹ In other words, multitude is a both singular in that it often acts in

²³⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 51.

²³⁹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, (New York: Penguin, 2004), 99.

common and collective in that it is composed of points of irreducible and irreconcilable differences.²⁴⁰ Thus, because biopower can never fully control and regulate multitude, multitude itself, by nature contested and plural, can serve as a form of resistance to empire and biopower.²⁴¹ I believe that the stories, experiences, testimonies, theologies, and practices that are created by and life-giving for single mothers can serve as counternarratives or forms of resistance that expose the operation of biopower within religion and help to release Christianity (or at least forms of it) to become a force to dismantle neoliberal hegemony and support the well-being of those victimized by empire. Corroborating this, Helene Slessarev-Jamir and Bruce Ellis Benson assert that the contested church – the church of multitude – allows a multitude of evangelicalisms.²⁴² Evangelicalism, then, according to this description, is a fragmented multitude whose contested nature is the basis for the potential for its transformation in the United States.

Christian metanarratives and practices are primary tools for the promotion of the nuclear family and the discouragement of single mothers from questioning their social, economic, and political inequality. In this chapter, I will examine the economics of single motherhood and how class (which, in brief, can be described as economic power, control, decision-making, and status) is formed through processes intentionally designed to exclude and disempower unwed mothers.²⁴³ To this end, I will analyze the experiences of actual single mothers in the United

²⁴⁰ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, , 101.

²⁴¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

²⁴² Helene Slessarev-Jamir and Bruce Ellis Benson, “The Contested Church: Multiple Others of Evangelical Multitude,” in *Evangelicals and Empire: Christian Alternatives to the Political Status Quo*, ed. Bruce Ellis Benson and Peter Goodwin Heltzel, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 34.

²⁴³ In *No Rising Tide*, Joerg Rieger defines class as “the amount of power and control people have in and over their work” and asserts that class is “fundamentally about the distribution of power.”

Joerg Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 35.

States who identify as devout Christians, in order to identify messages and practices in evangelical and other Christianities that they find to be inaccurate and harmful to them, as well as those messages and practices that empower them. Employing the critical lens of postcolonial feminist political theology, I will follow the tradition of feminist theologians who, as Kwok Pui-lan says, appeal to women's experiences as a source and criterion of truth because the androcentrism of the Christian Scriptures and the patriarchy of both the Bible's interpretation and the resulting church tradition produce unreliable truth claims.²⁴⁴ Women's experiences have been used by feminist theologians to challenge orthodoxy by exposing its constructed character, and the stories, experiences, and knowledge of single mothers may uncover angles to this character that we have not yet adequately explored. This may bring to light how Christian communities collude with hegemonic power or present challenges to this power and act as a resource for marginalized demographics – or at least for the particular demographic in question.

Method and Approach

Significantly, patriarchy is not static but dynamic, persisting in its various iterations to reproduce the same results of women's subordination, albeit in different forms. According to Kwok Pui-lan, patriarchy is really not a reference to men dominating women; this is an oversimplification that lends itself to the continuation of a much more extensive, systemic, and systematic hegemony. Rather, patriarchy is an interlocking system of oppression that involves, encompasses, and fuses racism, class-based injustice, sexism, and colonialism.²⁴⁵ In politics and

²⁴⁴ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 53-54.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

economics, as in other areas of life such as religion, patriarchy combines with capitalism to create a system whose navigability by women – and specifically single mothers – is particularly challenging, especially when read in comparison to many men’s experiences of the system. As I have discussed in the previous chapters, through a particular interpretation of gender and of Christianity, the injustice of the economic system that causes suffering and objectification of women is authorized by discourses that uphold these experiences of women as “natural” or even divinely ordained. Similarly, Kwok Pui-lan argues that in the United States, gender, sexuality, and marriage have been tied with the “powerful propaganda of the ‘American dream.’”²⁴⁶ We must explore how the private in fact intersects with national identity, class, women’s rights, race, and other key aspects of identity politics, in a “society of control,” to use Foucault’s term,²⁴⁷ in which biopower ties sexual fidelity to divine fidelity in order to construct kinship, nationhood, and monotheism.²⁴⁸ The metanarratives at play are a result of the confluence of the “gospel of capitalism”, the elevation of the patriarchal nuclear family as a sacred Christian institution, and myths of U.S. exceptionalism. Shame, exclusion from decision-making power, silencing, and economic hardship suffered by the unmarried mother are attributed to a transgression of “God’s will”. This alleged transgression thereby serves as justification for omitting unmarried mothers from the benefits of our socioeconomic-political systems and also operates as a means of masking the patriarchal and hegemonic nature of the sovereign economic system that determines who shares in power and prosperity.

²⁴⁶ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 101.

²⁴⁷ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1, An Introduction*, (New York: Vintage, 1980), 140.

²⁴⁸ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 101, 116.

The problematic dominance of certain evangelical theologies that rely upon and authorize patriarchy, white privilege, and class-based oppression through neoliberalism is thrown into bas relief by the testimonies of single mothers' struggles and the responses of churches that are influenced by these theologies, both here in the United States and internationally. However, this demographic has not received due attention, although the patriarchal and sexist sexual ethics, purity codes, and demonization of premarital sex and same-sex relations is increasingly the subject of robust scholarship and protest. What is missing is a more intersectional analysis of the implications of neoliberalism and its marriage with the power of evangelical Christianity, a critique that exposes the inseparability of class and gender. In this undertaking, I will employ a postcolonial feminist political theology. This critical lens combines political theology – which Kwok describes as contextual theologies developed to address concrete social and political concerns and to relate Christianity to people's lived experiences²⁴⁹ – and postcolonial theory with feminism, which looks at the Bible and Christian tradition “from the vantage point of women multiply oppressed because of race, class, conquest, and colonialism.”²⁵⁰ Postcolonial criticism utilizes tools from cultural studies and critical theory to bring to light the relationship between power and knowledge, writes Kwok, which in this case concerns “divine revelation” and interpretation of Scripture as it relates to gender, sexuality, morality, and successful navigation of a corrupt economic system. Additionally, postcolonialism challenges empire and nationalism and their claims to truth, superiority, and power, and “maintains a posture” of protest.²⁵¹ Although postcolonial critique developed in the Two-Thirds World to challenge the

²⁴⁹ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 150.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 65.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 64.

hegemony of Western metanarratives and practices, this lens is designed to encourage and make space for marginalized groups and eclipsed voices, such as unmarried mothers – even those located in the Global North.

By using postcolonial theory and reading Christian female heads of household as “hybrids”, their identities, stories, and lives may deconstruct the domination of the problematic metanarratives in question. Homi K. Bhabha writes that the hybrid confuses empire’s “rules of recognition”, which are the basis of its authority. Additionally, hybridity destabilizes dualisms and boundaries that lend themselves to the construction of a power center and justified peripheries, introducing instead the potency of the interstitial space.²⁵² In this case, empire has constructed the male-headed nuclear family as synonymous with Christian morality and the single mother as the anti-Christian Jezebel. Yet the religious devotion of single mothers and their testimonies of hard work expose the myths of difference that legitimize their demonization and trouble the binary categories of moral and immoral, Christian and heathen, hard-working and lazy. Likewise, identifying alternative sexual moralities in Scripture will prove a powerful means of debunking the vilification and oppression of these women.

For this project, I interviewed ten women who had experienced being single mothers and who identified as devout Christians in self-described conservative congregations, most of them evangelical. Of the ten, four were married at the time of the interview and six were still single parents. Eight of the ten had become pregnant outside of marriage, while the other two had gotten married before conceiving children and were later divorced. All interview participants were employed at the time, and three were also students. Six of the women self-identified as white or Caucasian, two of whom had children of mixed ethnicity, while one interview subject

²⁵² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 114.

self-identified as Vietnamese, another as Mexican American, and a third as African American. A fourth participant declined to give her ethnicity. Of the ten interview subjects, three were appointed to religious leadership in ministries to single parents or abused women. Though a small sample, these ten participants' stories paint a powerful picture of the battles and inequities female heads of household face, as well as the strategies for survival and empowerment they create, many of them with Christian or biblical roots. Their narratives can present us with an indication of possible patterns in their experiences that point to the operation of patriarchy in our economic and social structures, perpetuated in the privileging of the nuclear family, and the problems within prevalent Christian theologies and practices. They also present counternarratives such as the power and sanctity of communal-based theologies and practices that cut against privatization, female-headed and -centered systems and institutions, and formally recognized extended social and support networks that demonstrate that Christian alternatives are available that could deconstruct harmful messages and practices. These counternarratives could be utilized to mobilize Christian communities to formulate social action to challenge patriarchy and its privileging of the nuclear family and oppression of single mothers.

In both this chapter and the following one, I will often employ storytelling in relating the experiences of the women who participated in and guided my research. This method is a conscious choice, inspired by theologians such as Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Isabel Apawo Phiri, both of whom work in contexts in which storytelling factors powerfully in liberation movements, including those for women. According to Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar, the power of storytelling is especially significant in feminist and postcolonial political theologies because it shifts women from the roles of observers and victims into seeing themselves as participants and actors in history. Telling one's story encourages introspection and

reflection on one's own experiences, thus shaping and reshaping her identity and reframing the images she has of herself and others as women. Furthermore, when women tell their stories, the calculated exclusion of women and their gifts and the selective use of the Bible to justify patriarchy and other systems and ideologies that victimize women arises from the patterns inherent in disparate stories. As Phiri, Govinden, and Nadar argue, storytelling is important because "it helps us find a way forward," aiding us in changing "our future by changing the way we theologize, think about women, and embody society as one that values the humanity of all people."²⁵³ Through stories, women bear witness to one another's work and gifts, as well as to the operation of the Divine through women, and to the systematic oppression and injustice inflicted upon women. In hearing the stories of other women whose lives and witness resound with one's own testimony, the hearer of the story may then be inspired to reflect upon her own life in a new way and tell her own story.

Through telling these women's stories and offering analysis of their experiences and responses, I will identify how single mothers' experiences within Christian communities contribute to their alienation from power, while simultaneously offering resources for empowerment and potential counternarratives to resist socio-political and economic oppression and patriarchy. In this section, I contend that the family as an abstract ideal and as a lived reality is a socio-political entity linked to economically-driven power and patriarchy. I will detail the pressures and struggles that our patriarchal economic system of neoliberalism and metanarrative of the nuclear family produces for single mothers. Based on a close examination of the metanarrative and practices that fuel the hegemony of neoliberalism that preserves a small

²⁵³ Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar, "Introduction," *Her-stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, eds. Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devakarshanam Betty Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar, (Pietermaritzburg, KZN: Cluster Publications, 2002), 6-8 .

patriarchal class and construct single mothers as moral, religious, and social threats to the public good, I believe that privatization and individualism are the sources of injustice and oppression that victimize female-headed households. The testimonies of the single mothers interviewed for this project demonstrate the impact of theologies and socio-political and economic systems on their material and spiritual well-beings and reveal how evangelical Christianity has, in a sense, been bought by neoliberal interests. However, their experiences also point towards an alternative ethics and theology of community and mutual self-giving that supports the empowerment of single mothers but also may prove to deconstruct the inequality of classism and patriarchy and lend itself to a more equal distribution of power and well-being throughout all members of society.

Living Single Motherhood: The Realities of American Female-Headed Households

When Erin's²⁵⁴ boyfriend moved out of state and they broke up, she found herself raising a child alone and facing the prospect of working long hours away from her son each day. Therefore, Erin decided to go back to school for her teaching certificate so that she could come home earlier each evening and have holidays and summers off to spend with her child. Erin worked and went to school at the same time, relying on her mother for free childcare; still, she had to resort to using food stamps to put meals on the table for her son and herself. Even after receiving her teaching certificate and finding a position at an elementary school, Erin made only \$28,000 a year. Feeling stressed and alone, Erin entered into what she describes as a toxic and emotionally abusive relationship just to, as she says, "have somebody." Reflecting on her

²⁵⁴ Names have been changed to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of interview participants.

struggles to provide for her son, she says, “I knew if I ever got pregnant again, I would want someone with me the whole time.”

This experience of economic struggle, juggling multiple responsibilities beyond that which most individuals carry, feeling guilt for time away from offspring, and longing for someone to share the burden with is a common narrative told by single mothers, especially those who become pregnant unexpectedly outside of marriage (though those who parent alone or share custody as a result of divorce also often have similar experiences). One interview subject, Rose, a progressive evangelical reverend and pastor to victims of family abuse, asserts that in her own experience as a single mother and based on her work with single mothers leaving abusive relationships, the three biggest struggles single mothers face are 1) lack of familial support, 2) financial straits, and 3) childcare needs. In politics and economics, patriarchy combines with capitalism to create a system whose navigability by women – and specifically single mothers – is particularly challenging, especially when read in comparison to men’s experiences of the system. What is more, through a particular interpretation of gender and of Christianity, the injustice of the economic system that causes suffering and objectification of women is authorized through discourses that uphold these experiences of women as “natural” or even divinely ordained.

In this section, I will analyze the lived experiences of single mothers and their socioeconomic struggles to demonstrate that patriarchal biases within the system have a causal relationship with single mothers’ struggles. I believe the statistics, arguments, and narratives in this section serve to demystify the financial and social success and power of middle-class nuclear families in neoliberalism, lending credence to the thesis that the market system shaped up to retain patriarchal power. As a tool of empire to deepen the domination of the elite class which benefits from globalized neoliberalism and its attendant sexism and racism, the idealization –

perhaps even idolization – and the privatization of the nuclear family plays a role in supporting the class-based, patriarchal power structure and is thus rewarded for its conformity to the rules of empire by the system itself. One of the primary causes of single mothers’ struggles is the monolithic notion of family honored by Western socioeconomic, political, and religious entities; the lack of acknowledgement of alternative concepts of family aside from the privatized, nuclear structure has served to alienate single mothers from support and resources provided by wider networks and community. Thus, I argue that one of the key reasons why single mothers struggle to “succeed” in the present market system is that the spirit of privatization has served to diminish their access to material and supportive resources and their participation in the economy. Additionally, the spirit of privatization has melded with certain influential Christian theologies to create a culture and ideology that venerate the nuclear family, neglect community responsibility, vilify alternative family structures, and ignore theologies of empowerment for women and single mothers.

To Work or Not to Work: Statistics and Realities of the Struggles of Female-Headed Households

The United States is popularly touted as the wealthiest nation in the world, which is true – and it reached its highest cumulative wealth ever in 2013. But a recent study found that the bottom tenth percentile of the economic distribution in the United States ranked only thirteenth across developed nations. This study measured post-tax income, as well as transfer income, such as social security and other benefits, but not health care benefits. It found that, across industrialized nations, most growth between the 1980s and early 2000s in the bottom-tier incomes were due to increased government transfers (e.g. unemployment assistance, income-

based welfare, social security). However, the increase in the poorest ten percent's income in the United States was much less than in those countries that were converting their economic growth into expanding their federal aid programs and support for the most vulnerable in their societies. Comparatively, the United States spends a smaller portion of its wealth and resources on cash-transfer federal aid programs than the 26 other most developed countries. As Jordan Weissmann writes, "America's poor are poor by global standards because we've decided to leave them so."²⁵⁵

So who are the poor? Approximately 15 million children (21%) in the United States live below the federal poverty line, and more than 45 million people of all ages (14.5%) in America live in poverty. However, these figures do not accurately reflect the extent of poverty or the impact of class in America. The impoverished are not just those in the bottom ten percent of the American income distribution or those who are unemployed. Instead, 10.4 million American workers fall below the poverty line. In the recovery from the recession a decade ago, part-time jobs contributed significantly to the rebounding economy, and yet 14.4% of part-time workers live below the poverty threshold. The largest contributing factor to working poverty is low wages, while race, education, and parenthood also contribute to the likelihood of poverty. Yet even our awareness of the fact that employed Americans may fall below the poverty line does not fully capture the realities of class pressure and economic inequality that exists in the United States. For one, the federal poverty line underestimates the needs of families, and the National

²⁵⁵ Jordan Weissmann, "How Poor Are America's Poor, Really?" Moneybox (blog), Slate.com, January 5, 2015, www.slate.com/blogs/moneybox/2015/01/05/america_s_poor_vs_the_rest_of_the_world.html

Center for Children in Poverty says that on average, families actually need an income of twice the poverty line to cover their basic expenses.²⁵⁶

Just as the federal poverty line does not accurately reflect the line between earning living wages and being poor, the idea of a middle class in America does not reflect what actually exists in this country. According to Katie Rose Quandt, statistics show that, given the gross domestic wealth of the United States, the average American adult should earn \$348,000 – a per capita GDP that ranks fourth in the world. In reality, the typical American adult’s total wealth is \$31,688, and the median household income, \$51,939, increased only \$180 from 2012 to 2013 – the year in which the United States hit its highest GDP ever. In fact, the United States is ranked twenty-first in the world for median wealth, and the share of the total national income that the middle 60 percent of the American population receives has decreased consistently since the 1960s and is well below 50 percent of the total wealth.²⁵⁷ Yet the decline of the middle class and of the true financial well-being of the average American has nothing to do with work ethic or productivity. According to G.E. Miller, the average productivity per American worker has increased 400 percent since 1950, which means that it should only take a quarter of the work hours or eleven hours of work per week to produce the same amount of results and output to support the same standard of living – or else the American standard of living should be four times higher than it was in the 1950s. This is not the case. As Miller writes, “Someone is benefitting [from the productivity of the American labor force] – just not the average American

²⁵⁶ Heather Koball and Yang Jiang, “Basic Facts about Low-Income Children,” National Center for Children in Poverty, January, 2018, http://nccp.org/publications/pub_1194.html (accessed March 16, 2018)

²⁵⁷ Katie Rose Quandt, “5 Charts that Show How the Middle Class Is Disappearing,” Moyers and Company, January 26, 2015, billmoyers.com/2015/01/26/middle-class/ (accessed March 16, 2018).

worker.”²⁵⁸ Between 1999 and 2012, the top 1% of the population by wealth saw an income increase of 181%, while the other 99% saw income growth of a mere 2.6%.²⁵⁹

Class inequality and injustice has deepened in American society, not only increasing but also becoming entrenched in our systems and often slipping under popular detection. For example, a 2015 Pew Research study reports that 57% of Americans believe that success in life is determined by forces within our control, while 73% percent responded that they felt it “very important to work hard to get ahead in life.” The global median across 44 nations who responded to these two questions was 38% and 50%, respectively. What this survey demonstrates is that, despite facts that reveal that the exceptional productivity and hard work of the average American worker is not translating to financial well-being, control over one’s own success, or even job security, the metanarrative of the American Dream – that our conformity to certain rules and norms will literally pay off – continues to hold sway in the United States. Thus, the injustice of the American class system goes unchallenged.

Another dimension to the power of this metanarrative is that this same Pew study revealed that the United States stands out amongst other nations not only for its conviction that hard work pays off but also in that it exhibits a higher religiosity than any other wealthy nation (while less industrialized nations also exhibit high levels of religiosity). 54% of Americans say religiosity is very important in their lives, and 53% say that belief in God is a prerequisite for being moral and having good values.²⁶⁰ These two unique features of American culture –

²⁵⁸ G.E. Miller, “The U.S. Is the Most Overworked Developed Nation in the World,” *20something Finance*, <https://20somethingfinance.com/american-hours-worked-productivity-vacation/> (accessed March 16, 2018).

²⁵⁹ Katie Rose Quandt, “5 Charts that Show How the Middle Class Is Disappearing.”

²⁶⁰ George Gad, “How do Americans stand out from the rest of the world?” Pew Research Center, March 12, 2015, accessed March 16, 2018, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/03/13/how-do-americans-stand-out-from-the-rest-of-the-world/

individualism and religiosity – are interconnected and coalesce in a metanarrative that ties work ethic, faith in the market system, and respect for wealth and power with Christianity and morality. Charles W. Amjad-Ali and Edwin J. Ruiz address this dynamic, connecting individualism and evangelical theology with postcolonial political theological critique. They write that in order to transform empire, we must be aware that sociopolitical and economic power have generated a kind of theological knowledge that provide “fundamental religio-moral underpinnings for empire.”²⁶¹ In particular, evangelicals drew upon their Puritan ancestry’s depiction of the colonization of America as God’s preordained will for a chosen people and theologies of double predestination that, combined, justified their right to others’ land, labor, and bodies.²⁶² In modern-day evangelicalism, this theological ancestry lends itself to ideologies of separation and binary division between decent and indecent, proper and improper, moral and immoral, deserving and undeserving, saint and sinner. To determine who belongs to each category, Puritan Christianity introduced to American religion personal pietism as an indicator of righteousness and entitlement to reward, an ideology developed in conjunction with economic privatization and cultural individualism. Today, many forms of evangelicalism interpret success as answered prayers, God’s blessing, and a reward for piety in such a way that, as Amjad-Ali and Ruiz assert, the “Kingdom of God is reduced to individual salvation, piety, and reward.”²⁶³ Thus, personal pietism that consists of conformity to certain Western-developed morality codes and traditional gender roles, individual devotional practices in keeping with popular models of

²⁶¹ Charles W. Amjad-Ali and Lester Edwin J. Ruiz, “Betrayed by a Kis: Evangelicals and U.S. Empire,” *Evangelicals and Empire: Christian Alternatives to the Political Status Quo*, eds. Bruce Ellis Benson and Peter Goodwin Heltzel, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 55.

²⁶² Charles W. Amjad-Ali and Lester Edwin J. Ruiz, “Betrayed by a Kis: Evangelicals and U.S. Empire,” 57.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 58.

evangelical religiosity, and respect of hierarchical authority and economic systems is, according to the prevailing metanarrative, expected to result in privatized material success as a reward.

Part and parcel of the success of such a metanarrative is the absence of support for the American middle class, working class, or poor. The United State is the only country in the Americas without national paid family leave, the only country out of 134 nations surveyed that lacks laws setting the maximum length of the work week, and the only industrialized nation with no legally mandated and paid holidays or vacation. Even when we realize that the lack of support for U.S. workers is the exception when compared to other nations, we still fail to challenge neoliberalism and class inequality in effective ways for several reasons. For one, U.S. companies are renowned for their lack of loyalty to employees, ruthlessly terminating employment, which not only generates a submissive attitude in workers to employers in a top-down power structure but also engenders competitiveness amongst employees, as none of them want to work less or underperform in comparison to one another. Secondly, the dominant metanarrative of individual control of success or failure and the Protestant work ethic leads us to believe we are lazy compared to other emerging market counterparts, and the fact that our jobs are being outsourced to cheap labor in the globalized market and that we are expendable and replaceable cogs in a productive machine fuels our belief in the metanarrative or reticence to challenge it. Finally, the entanglement of big business and its interests and American politics has resulted in a general avoidance of and failure of legislature that protects workers.²⁶⁴ These dynamics have strengthened the power and success of the tiny elite class to the detriment of the overwhelming majority of the American populace, but single mothers in particular have suffered at the hands of these issues. The individualism of the American Dream and its confluence with a particular

²⁶⁴ G.E. Miller, "The U.S. is the Most Overworked Developed Nation in the World."

religiosity and morality has cast unmarried mothers as deserving of their struggles, while the laws – or lack thereof – that fail to support working parents are especially marginalizing and oppressive to female heads of household. What is more, neoliberalism creates a class system that, while disempowering for nearly everyone, still produces a hierarchy or spectrum of benefits that rewards those who most closely comply with and support the hegemony of a patriarchal, hypermasculine set of value and practices – a hegemony that serves to keep the elite class in power. Single mother find themselves, by and large, at the lowest end of the hierarchy.

In 2015, there were approximately 15.63 million families in the United States headed by single mothers. Of those, over 4.4 million (over 28%) are officially below the poverty line, up from 3.7 million in 1990 (when the number of single-mother households numbered 11.27 million), although some research findings indicate that this percentage may be over 30%.²⁶⁵ Although the number of female-headed households living below the poverty line has decreased by about 700,000 since 2010, the percentage of single mothers and their families struggling to make ends meet daily is staggering, especially when considering the number of single mothers who are employed – and particularly when comparing statistics on single mothers to those of single fathers. For the past twenty years, the number of single mothers who hold full-time employment has fluctuated between 45% and 53%, with anywhere from an additional 29% to 32% employed part-time or seasonally. Comparatively, 57% of all women of employable age (married or single) are employed, according to 2015 statistics, either full-time or part-time.²⁶⁶ In

²⁶⁵ The 2015 statistics cited here are found in the U.S. Census. The higher statistic on the percentage of single mothers living in poverty is published by the National Poverty Center at the University of Michigan.

“Poverty in the United States,” Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy National Poverty Center, University of Michigan, accessed April 10, 2017, <http://npc.umich.edu/poverty/>

²⁶⁶ “Women in the Labor Force,” Women’s Bureau, United States Department of Labor, accessed April 10, 2017, https://www.dol.gov/wb/stats/stats_data.htm

the past twenty years, the percentage of single mothers who are not employed has never risen above 24%. In comparison, in 2015, only 14.9% of single-father families lived below the poverty line, roughly 14% less than single mothers.²⁶⁷ What these statistics show is that the economic struggles that single mothers are facing has more to do with a patriarchal structure that benefits similarly situated men and women who are married more than women who lack a spouse. Single mothers across the board are disadvantaged by the policies, practices, and structure of our present market and social system in disproportion to men who appear to be similarly situated as single fathers. No explanation apart from an innate patriarchal gender bias seems plausible.

Additional research indicates that the struggles and poverty of single mothers and their families have more to do with this bias than with the notion that single-parent households *cause* poverty or are innately problematic. According to the metanarrative that circulates in our American society concerning the dangers of single parents to family values and social well-being, immoral choices lead to single parenting and contribute to cyclical, generational struggles and social ills, and any public aid to female-headed households rewards these choices and encourages laziness, the nemesis of the American Dream. However, Timothy Casey and Laurie Maldonado conducted a study of the United States in comparison to sixteen other high-income countries in 2012 to determine the effects of better resources to support the well-being of female-headed households. In this study, the comparable countries selected all had a per capita GNI of over \$30,000 and a population of at least several million, amongst which the percentage of children living in single-parent families was 10% or higher.²⁶⁸ According to their research, single

²⁶⁷ “Poverty Rate of Families with a Single Father in the U.S. from 1990 to 2016,” Statista, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/204990/percentage-of-poor-families-with-a-male-householder-in-the-us/>

²⁶⁸ The countries in this study, aside from the United States, were the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, Australia, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Belgium, Canada, and France.

parents in the United States have higher employment rates and poverty rates than in any other country, rendering American single-parent families worse off than those in any of the other comparable countries. In the United States, single parents' employment rates range from 73-84%, increasing with the age of their children, and single parents have exceptionally high rates of full-time employment versus part-time work compared to single parents in the other countries in the study. Yet a disproportionate number of these workers are employed in low-wage work. Even though a quarter of single mothers in the United States have a college degree and only one-sixth have not finished high school, 40% of all American single mothers are engaged in low-wage employment (defined as that in which family income is less than 200% of the official U.S. poverty level), as compared to 25% of all American jobholders.²⁶⁹

This statistical disparity between single mothers' educational attainment and pay grade is not present for single fathers; in fact, the gender wage gap persists when comparing single mothers and single fathers. As recent research by Casey and Maldonado indicates, no achievement of a particular educational level can rectify the gender wage gap between men and women. According to their report, "[single] mothers in the U.S. are paid much less than comparably educated single fathers or married men."²⁷⁰ Single mothers working full-time without a high-school education make an average annual salary of \$20,000, while single fathers make \$26,000 and married men make \$30,000. At the highest educational level accounted for in this study (a college degree or higher), single mothers have an average salary of \$53,000, single fathers earn \$62,000, and married men make an average of \$80,000.²⁷¹ Heidi Hartmann,

²⁶⁹ Timothy Casey and Laurie Maldonado, "Worst Off - Single-Parent Families in the United States," Legal Momentum, December 2012, accessed February 11, 2016, <http://www.legalmomentum.org/sites/default/files/reports/worst-off-single-parent.pdf>, 9.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 9.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 9.

Katherine Allen, and Christine Owens found in 1999 (the last year that such a study was conducted) that if American single mothers earned as much as single fathers at the same educational level and employment status, their annual earnings would increase by 17% and the U.S. poverty rate for single mothers would fall by half.²⁷²

The gender wage gap is not the only contributing factor in the disproportionate burden carried by single mothers that is not necessarily felt by single mothers in other countries. The United States also has the highest rate of poverty for married couples out of all of the nations in the study, and some of the causes of this are compounded in female-headed households. Of the seventeen countries in the study, the United States was the only one that provided no guaranteed paid annual leave for its workers. Furthermore, the Family Medical Leave Act in the United States is available to only about half of U.S. employees, and low-wage workers, of which single mothers are a significant percentage, are less likely to be covered by the act. FMLA does not grant paid leave to any employee, though private employers may provide paid parental and medical leave at their discretion. In 2011, only 11% of U.S. employees had access to paid family leave, and many workers cannot afford to forego an income for the twelve weeks of leave guaranteed by the FMLA. The United States is the only country in the study that does not provide pay for at least a portion of the leave, and it also affords its employees the shortest number of weeks off (twelve weeks, in comparison to twelve other comparable countries that offer at least 50 weeks of parental leave).²⁷³ In terms of general leave, including sick leave, vacation, and personal days, only 32% of all single parents in the United States and 64% of

²⁷² Heidi Hartmann, Katherine Allen, and Christine Owens, *Equal Pay for Working Families*, (Washington, D.C., 1999), <http://www.iwpr.org/publications/pubs/equal-pay-for-working-families> (accessed April 10, 2017)

²⁷³ Casey and Maldonado, "Worst Off - Single-Parent Families in the United States," 10.

married parents had access in 2011 to paid leave.²⁷⁴ Because of the difficulties of procuring paid leave to care for children, many female heads of household must take temporary, seasonal, or part-time work or find themselves leaving jobs due to the inflexibility of leave policies when child-care issues arise. When this occurs, single mothers may find themselves ineligible for unemployment insurance. Unemployment insurance in the United States is a state-based system, and three-quarters of states do not offer child supplements in the unemployment insurance benefits they provide. Furthermore, to receive any unemployment benefits, the potential beneficiary must have earned at least a minimum wage level and been employed in their previous position for a certain number of months. These benefits average about one-half of prior earnings and usually last for 26 weeks, which is less than half of the median maximum duration of unemployment insurance reception in the comparable countries of the study.²⁷⁵ Because of the preponderance of American single mothers in low-wage and part-time employment and the number of single mothers who are forced to resign their positions due to family or child care reasons, only about 24% of unemployed single mothers received unemployment insurance in 2010, compared to 44% of all other unemployed Americans.²⁷⁶

For working mothers, the education system and the childcare necessities that arise out of this system pose additional hurdles to fiscal thriving. Because the typical workday lasts beyond that of the average school day, most single mothers must find childcare for the after-school hours. Due to the lack of paid leave for American workers, working mothers must also find child care for holidays and school breaks. Part-time work and lower-wage jobs may offer greater

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 13.

²⁷⁵ Casey and Maldonado, "Worst Off - Single-Parent Families in the United States, 19-21.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 21.

scheduling flexibility or night shifts that allow women to rely on family and friends for free or less expensive childcare. The average cost of full-time care for an infant in the United States in 2011 varied by state from \$4,551 to \$20,178 per year. This cost amounts to 26-54% of the state median income for a single mother with a full-time job and an infant, while the average single mother would pay 48-99% of her annual salary for child care for two children each year, depending on the state.²⁷⁷ While every other comparable country offers a “child allowance” – cash payments each month from the government to help offset the cost of raising children, the United States does not have such a program.²⁷⁸ Ten of the countries have “universal” child allowance programs provided to all families regardless of income level, while other countries have income-based benefits.²⁷⁹ The two federal income tax programs that the United States does have, the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Additional Child Tax Credit, are only paid once per year, which makes budgeting difficult, are meager in their amounts, and are unavailable to a number of single parents due to income levels or unemployment.²⁸⁰ Thus, many single mothers face the difficult choice of whether to find full-time employment and pay perhaps a majority of their salary towards child care services, secure part-time work that provides few additional benefits and lower wages, or provide their own child care for their children and receive government assistance. For a single mother who chooses to stay home and care for her children

²⁷⁷ Casey and Maldonado, "Worst Off - Single-Parent Families in the United States," 14.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 15.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 15-16.

²⁸⁰ The EITC offers a maximum of \$3,169 to single parents with one child, which is reduced by 15.98% for every dollar over \$17,090 that the parent makes. For single parents with two children, the maximum credit of \$5,236 is reduced by 21.06% for every dollar over \$17,090. The ACTC gives low-income families a credit of 15% of their annual earnings over \$3,000 to a maximum of \$1,000 per child.

Casey and Maldonado, "Worst Off - Single-Parent Families in the United States," 17.

rather than pay for child care services while she works outside the home, the support offered by the American government is limited, and the social repercussions and stigma surrounding her choice will almost certainly be great. In 1996, President Bill Clinton introduced Temporary Assistance to Needy Families in his welfare reform. In this new program, beneficiaries are subject to a two-consecutive-year cap and a five-year lifetime limit and are required to work at least thirty hours per week. Within ten years of its passage, the number of poor female-headed households served by TANF was reduced by 63% from the number served by TANF's predecessor, Aid for Dependent Children, due to budget cuts.²⁸¹ Yet, at the same time that financial assistance to single mothers and other poor families decreased, spending on other public assistance programs has increased over the past thirty years. According to Olga Khazan's research in "How Welfare Reform Left Single Moms Behind," assistance to married-parent and childless families has increased between 1983 and 2004, and the average older adult received 20% more in 2004 than in 1983. However, the average able-bodied single parent under 62 years of age received 20% less, meaning that single-parent families had greater access to public assistance in 1983 than they did in 2004.²⁸² SNAP (the American food stamp program) and TANF are the only programs to which most poor single mothers have access, but spending on TANF was lower in 2007 than in 1970, and the limited assistance available through TANF is restricted to single-parent families making less than one-half of the poverty level.²⁸³ Even still, as

²⁸¹ Olga Khazan, "How Welfare Reform Left Single Moms Behind," *The Atlantic*, May 12, 2014, accessed September 15, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/05/how-welfare-reform-left-single-moms-behind/361964/>

²⁸² Olga Khazan, "How Welfare Reform Left Single Moms Behind."

²⁸³ The exceptions are those who are over 62 or who can claim a disability. Olga Khazan, "How Welfare Reform Left Single Moms Behind."

of 2014, the poorest single-parent families received 35% less in assistance than they did thirty years ago, while spending on older and disabled adults has increased.²⁸⁴

This reduced funding is problematic due to the persistent struggle with poverty that many Americans face, but these welfare policies operate insidiously to benefit patriarchy and target single mothers in particular. 80% of the single-parent families receiving government support are female-headed. While the percentage of female-headed households in the United States has increased and consistently comprises a significant portion of America's working poor, government assistance available to these families has decreased, while federal spending on welfare programs as a whole has increased. For example, as Khazan points out, government spending on older and disabled adults has increased over the past three decades.²⁸⁵ Furthermore, Estelle B. Freedman observes that veterans' benefits, workers' compensation, and unemployment insurance are considered rights provided by the state – and these programs have historically been granted to men without any burden of proof on their part to demonstrate their need. However, for a single mother – the primary recipient of TANF – to receive federal assistance, she must demonstrate severe need, and in such a way, TANF becomes a litmus test to determine which mothers are deserving and undeserving of help.²⁸⁶ Ironically, though, the opinion amongst a good portion of the general public is that no recipient of welfare is “deserving” of assistance, and this stigma of welfare is a powerful force in producing shame in single mothers and even deterring many from seeking federal assistance.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Olga Khazan, “How Welfare Reform Left Single Moms Behind.”

²⁸⁶ Estelle B. Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*, 196.

Contrary to the myth of the “welfare mother”, only a small percentage of the many low-income, impoverished, or financially at-risk single mothers actually receive government assistance. As of 2009, 41.3% of custodial single mothers received some form of public assistance, with 32.3% taking SNAP benefits and a mere 6.8% receiving TANF,²⁸⁷ and in 2011, only about 27% of impoverished families received TANF, despite the recession.²⁸⁸ Furthermore, the Census Bureau reports that between 2009 and 2012, 56% of those receiving welfare benefits stopped within three years, 43% quit between three and four years, and nearly one-third stopped within only a year.²⁸⁹ This means that the vast majority of welfare recipients find employment or sources of support that render them ineligible for federal assistance before they “time out” of the program. Thus, the argument that welfare encourages recipients to live off the government and detracts from incentive to find employment has no basis in statistical reality. Notoriously, most Americans who live in or near poverty do not qualify for TANF, so the cessation of welfare benefits due to increased income does not necessarily indicate that these families who leave welfare within a couple years are no longer struggling financially. However, what the aforementioned figures do reveal is that the myth that recipients of government aid “live on” these benefits or treat them as a long-term alternative to self-sufficiency is simply untrue. In fact, only a small percentage remain on welfare for the duration of the five-year maximum limit.

²⁸⁷ Jennifer Wolf, “Single Parent Statistics: Census Data on the Number of Kids Being Raised By One Parent,” About.com, November 24, 2012, accessed February 1, 2016, [Singleparents.about.com/od/legalissues/p/portrait.htm](http://singleparents.about.com/od/legalissues/p/portrait.htm)

²⁸⁸ Michelle Ye Hee Lee, “Do ‘Welfare’ Recipients Get \$35,000 a Year in Benefits?” *The Washington Post*, December 5, 2014, accessed April 28, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2014/12/05/grothman-single-parents-welfare/?utm_term=.065c12ab930a

²⁸⁹ Delaney, Arthur, “How Long Do People Stay on Public Benefits?” *The Huffington Post*, May 29, 2015, accessed April 28, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/29/public-benefits-safety-net_n_7470060.html

Yet in 2014, Wisconsin's Republican Representative and outspoken critic of the U.S. federal assistance program Glenn Grothman claimed that welfare provides single mothers with only two children up to \$35,000 in benefits. According to Michelle Ye Hee Lee, Grothman used a Wisconsin-based study that presumed the hypothetical woman was a full-time student and a part-time employee and tallied into the benefits package an estimate of student loans received by the woman. Lee writes that while Grothman's figures are "technically correct," the variables and characteristics of the hypothetical case-study family described only 260 out of Wisconsin's 5.7 million residents and indicated only a state-specific possible package.²⁹⁰ Grothman's proclamation presents "statistics" and argumentation that contributes to the creation of a metanarrative of single mothers as lazy and detrimental to society. This metanarrative assumes that public assistance "creates" single motherhood, "penalizes" two-parent families, and "encourages" laziness and reliance on others to provide for irresponsible women and their children. However, there is no evidence, nor does Grothman purport to present evidence, that single mothers or any other welfare recipients rely totally on welfare. In fact, in Grothman's hypothetical case, the woman is working part-time while attending school full-time, an act which can be construed as job training or preparation for seeking better employment. Additionally, TANF recipients are required to either work at least 30 hours per week or else provide evidence of job training and job-seeking efforts.

Furthermore, the comparison of hypothetical families indicates no "penalty" to his hypothetical two-parent family but rather demonstrates that married couples at a certain income level receive less in federal assistance than single mothers with lower incomes. In Grothman's argument, the second hypothetical family has two children and a household income of \$50,000

²⁹⁰ Michelle Ye Hee Lee, "Do 'Welfare' Recipients Get \$35,000 a Year in Benefits?"

and receives only slightly above \$5,000 in welfare benefits. Grothman's alleges that granting the single mother with only a part-time job a larger benefit package in comparison to the second family, presumably with at least one full-time job between the two spouses, shows favoritism and is "unfair." Grothman's argumentation is indicative of the common confusion and debate over equity versus equality, in which equality – the idea that justice entails treating all parties equally and doling out quantitatively equal benefits and assistance – is espoused over equity – the notion that justice entails that parties and entities operate in this world on unequal playing fields and that the necessity to even the playing field requires that the disadvantaged parties be treated differently than advantaged ones. When we look at the argument for equality, often taken up by those in the privileged or advantaged position, we see implications of power – a resistance to sharing power and of evening out access to power and to the means of thriving. Those who espouse equality over equity might feel that offering assistance to an impoverished family so that their well-being is elevated without offering this same assistance to a more advantaged family is unjust. In reality, though, to give equally to the two families would at the very least maintain the gap in wealth, power, and financial well-being.

Contrary to the myth that single mothers live off government resources or introduce a problematic cycle of laziness and dependency in their own children, there is no indication that single motherhood contributes in any way to government dependency or laziness. In terms of maternal employment, the number of single mothers who are employed is virtually the same as the number of married mothers who are employed, and only a small percentage depend entirely on welfare.²⁹¹ Of the ten women who participated in interviews on their experiences of single motherhood and Christianity, eight indicated that they faced significant financial struggles as

²⁹¹ Sara McLanahan, "The Consequences of Single Motherhood," *The American Prospect*, Summer 1994, accessed April 14, 2016, <https://prospect.org/article/consequences-single-motherhood>

single mothers, and an additional participant said that one of her biggest struggles was negotiating power with her parents, with whom she lived because they helped her financially and with childcare. All ten of the women interviewed are employed full-time, with only one self-employed in a work-from-home job (that also requires travel). These numbers reflect the high percentage of single mothers who are employed, compared not only to the percentage of single mothers in other countries who hold employment but also to the employment rate of women in general in the United States. However, in the United States, a full-time worker making minimum wage and raising just one child will still be below the poverty line, and over 60% of minimum-wage workers are women (with an even higher percentage of single mothers holding minimum-wage positions).²⁹² According to C. Melissa Snarr's research in "Women's Working Poverty: Feminist and Religious Alliances in the Living Wage Campaign," poverty rates for men and women are about the same in childhood but increase for women during childbearing years, pointing to a connection between motherhood and lower status in the economic system that does not exist for fatherhood. As Snarr writes, "[Women's] predominance in low-wage occupations, inadequate institutional support (for example, lack of child care, familial allowances, and child support, and lack of assets leave women particularly vulnerable to poverty."²⁹³ Yet, often in our national myths, the growing rate of female-headed households gets blamed for the feminization of poverty, the implication being that the deviance of these family forms, cast as immorality, is the cause of their own impoverishment.

²⁹² Estelle B. Freedman, *No Turning Back*, 194.

²⁹³ C. Melissa Snarr, "Women's Working Poverty: Feminist and Religious Alliances in the Living Wage Movement," in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 27 (2011): 75-93.

In the debate concerning welfare, single motherhood, and work, what is implicitly ignored, though, is the devaluing of domestic work, traditionally associated with women and thought to be non-productive. As we have mentioned before, the work of child rearing and home maintenance is in fact economic, though it is unsubsidized. This unpaid and underpaid work has historically allowed capitalism to develop and expand by freeing males to spend longer hours in the workplace without having to spend their time or income on domestic tasks and child care. Ironically, single mothers must navigate the double standard of a cultural narrative that still shames women with young children for working outside the home and praises the stay-at-home mother and the public shaming of unmarried mothers who work part-time or receive federal support in lieu of full-time jobs so that they can stay home to care for their children. However, while this metanarrative persists, Margaret L. Andersen contends that the traditional family ideal of a male spouse in the workplace and a female spouse staying home to raise children no longer describes the majority of actual American family experiences,²⁹⁴ and, in reality, there is “no clear and consistent evidence that mothers holding full-time employment is harmful to children.”²⁹⁵ Yet although American culture is, generally speaking, much more accepting of women’s and, in particular, mothers’ employment outside the home than it was even a few decades ago, a Pew study conducted in 2016 indicates that 59% of American adults still believe that children are better off when a parent stays home. Ironically, both parents are employed full-time in nearly half (46%) of all two-parent homes, about half of all mothers work full-time, and 16% of mothers work part-time. Still, 45% of all those who believe that children fare better when a

²⁹⁴ Margaret L. Andersen, “Feminism and the American Family Ideal,” in *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2, *The American Dream of Family: Ideals and Changing Realities* (Summer 1991): 235-246.

²⁹⁵ Ann Crittenden, *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World Is Still the Least-Valued*, 19.

parent stays home say that it is more appropriate for the mother to fill this role. Men are more likely than women to believe that a parent should stay home with children, and they are also more likely to believe that the mother should not work outside the home.²⁹⁶ This study reveals the persistence of the metanarrative of a woman's role as domestic caregiver and a man's role as breadwinner in our culture despite structural changes.

Statistically speaking, though, two-parent families in the United States still experience higher rates of poverty than in other comparable developed nations. Knowing this, since most American families do either need two incomes or else provide their own childcare in order to save on its exorbitant cost, women are more likely than men to withdraw from the workforce to provide this service since they typically make less than men. Women then fall further behind men in earning power and skill development.²⁹⁷ The realities of single motherhood certainly make it difficult to care for children, pursue education or careers, or be involved in politics, but, unfortunately, the requirements of women in marital families do not often differ greatly. As the article "Feminist Perspectives on Reproduction and the Family" argues, "[the] structures of work and family thus form a 'cycle of vulnerability' that conditions the lives and choices of women."²⁹⁸ In other words, marriage does not address the injustices and power differentials built into the very fiber of our policies and practices, and the encouragement of such as a solution further entrenches the power of patriarchy and the inequality of women.

Significantly, while women across the board are subject to vilification through the cultural belief that mothers ought to stay home with their children, single mothers suffer from

²⁹⁶ Nikki Graf, "Most Americans say children are better off with a parent at home," Pew Research Center, October 10, 2016, accessed March 11, 2017, Pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/10/10/most-americans-say-children-are-better-off-with-a-parent-at-home

²⁹⁷ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Feminist Perspectives on Reproduction and the Family."

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

this narrative disproportionately more than married mothers. Most single mothers either need to work or else receive federal assistance, while a notable though decreasing percentage of married mothers are able to refrain from working outside the home for at least a period of time in their children's lives. Though many married mothers do not experience the choice either to find employment or to stay home but are forced by necessity or metanarrative into their positions, single mothers rarely have the opportunity to exercise choice at all without experiencing considerable stigmatization. As sexist and oppressive as the notion that women are best suited to domestic tasks and child-rearing is, at least married women receive praise (though not pay or equal power to men) when they are homemakers. This compliance affords the smallest of benefits in a patriarchal system. When female heads of household choose the homemaking role, they are vilified as lazy, dangerous, and un-American drains on our national resources. When they seek employment, they are reminded of the harm their working does to their children.

The Erosion of Extended Networks of Support

Single mothers cannot win in this socioeconomic system, and two key reasons for this are the economic and social devaluation of caregiving and the scandal of women performing necessary domestic and child-rearing tasks while simultaneously managing to provide economically for their children in a way that levels the playing field between men and women, thus increasing women's access to male-controlled power. If a woman can do it all, and do it all well, then this can undercut the metanarrative that society's well-being is founded on the necessity of heterosexual, complementary gendered pairings, in which men tend to dominate and the legacy of a more overtly androcentric culture still drives our cultures and norms. I am not arguing that women do not need men, per se, but rather that women do not need this particular

pairing with men; instead, they need a wider network of supportive entities and persons, regardless of their gender. Support of these networks, with the potential of female-only or female-led kin and fictive kin groups, would destabilize patriarchy and redistribute power and resources.

By privileging the heterosexual, married-parent family, our society has successfully undermined the legitimacy of extended kin and fictive kin networks, a dynamic with significant racist implications and with direct repercussions for the single-parent family. Throughout history and across every culture, motherhood has been held in high esteem, but the sisterhood of women and mothers has also been a primary value of cultures throughout the world. It is this latter value that neoliberal capitalism in most spaces in Western Europe and North America has eroded through its emphases on privatization and competition. The construction of policies and metanarratives, in which Christianity has had a central role, that prioritize this particular family structure to the neglect of alternative extended families shares a large portion of the responsibility for the struggles that single mothers face – as well as in the “social ills” for which single mothers get blamed and for which they become a cautionary tale. Jon Jeter observes while discussion about public assistance in the United States has focused on the plight of unmarried women with children, since the welfare reform of the late twentieth century this aid mandates the promotion of “stable, two-parent households” that are autonomous and atomized.²⁹⁹ Similarly, Margaret Andersen argues that policies that do acknowledge the plight of the single-parent family in the United States focus on the man’s absence rather than women’s poverty, assuming that moving men back into the home will solve the problems at stake.³⁰⁰ This

²⁹⁹ Jon Jeter, “Making Family a Man’s World: Welfare Reform Brings Emphasis on Fathers” *The Washington Post*, July 8, 1997, accessed April 4, 2017, <https://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-739683.html>

³⁰⁰ Margaret L. Andersen, “Feminism and the American Family Ideal,” 242.

is one of the main tactics of Christian entities who seek to address the pressures and problems associated with single parenting. According to this notion, the male functions as a sort of savior figure – the rescuer of the woman in distress and the rectification of her family’s brokenness. It fails to address the power and economic differentials between men and women that lend credence to this mythology of the male savior, nor is there a similar narrative of females rescuing male-headed households from social struggles. Additionally, this idea reinforces women’s dependence on men and thus undermines women’s equality and power in relationships. What remains ignored is the potential for extended social networks and communal systems that differ from the privatized, nuclear social organization upon which much of American society is based to ameliorate the struggles of many suffering populations in the United States and to equalize power between people of all genders, marital status, and races.

Additionally, retooling our concept of the two-parent nuclear family as the basic building block of a good society and embracing the necessity of wider communal networks would demystify and counter the villainization of single mothers while promoting the health and well-being of female-headed families. Even with the statistics pointing to the problems lying beyond family structure in the larger realm of our economic, political, social, and cultural systems, the single-parent family is still blamed for the struggles and troubles they and their children face. In her article, “The Consequences of Single Motherhood,” Sara McLanahan lists a number of statistics and trends that pertain to single-parent households. For one, children who grow up with only one parent are twice as likely to drop out of high school, two-and-a-half times as likely to become teenage parents, and boast lower grade-point averages and poorer school attendance than children growing up with two married parents.³⁰¹ However, as McLanahan points out, children

³⁰¹ Sarah McLanahan, “The Consequences of Single Motherhood.”

raised by widowed mothers fare better than children raised by never-married mothers or divorced single parents since there are more generous social policies toward widows, greater social acceptance of and social care for widows and their families, and lower parental conflict. This belies the implicit bias towards unmarried mothers. McLanahan also writes that custodial parents report a significant decrease in income after separation from partners, as well as a decrease in access to “social capital”, such as friendships, supportive adults who invest in the lives of children, and role models, and community resources – often due to more frequent moving and loss of relationships. Because of the lack of supplemental and supportive resources for single-parent families, the children of single-parent families are more vulnerable to social troubles. According to McLanahan, the loss of economic resources accounts for about half of the disadvantages associated with single-parent families, and too little supervision, involvement, and residential stability account for most of the rest.³⁰²

This statistic was corroborated by an interview participant, a former single mother who now leads a single-parent ministry at a large nondenominational church. According to the respondent, if she could change anything for single mothers, she would change the economic struggle they face, citing the lower pay women for the same jobs as men. She mentioned that in her own experience, she has seen how children suffer by having to move more frequently when their parent’s job lacks stability or sufficient pay, thus losing friendships and being forced to deal with extensive change, and that this could be ameliorated through income supplements from the state. In other words, these disadvantages that get blamed on single parents – as though this family form inevitably causes or leads to these struggles and problems – could be remedied or at

³⁰² Sarah McLanahan, “The Consequences of Single Motherhood.”

least significantly alleviated with more supportive social systems and policies and a culture that celebrates the potential for any family form to be healthy.

Numerous studies and experts have reported that a child does not need two biological parents – married or otherwise – to thrive but does indeed suffer when they only have access to one supportive adult. For example, after comparing female-headed households in Sweden with those in the United States, the Council on Contemporary Families determined that “children can get by with one parent but not so successfully with only one adult supporter.” Both countries have about the same percentage of single mothers, but Sweden has only a fraction of the delinquency and social ills related to children of single-parent families that the United States has, largely due to single mothers’ support networks in Sweden that provide interaction, resources, and leadership opportunities for single mothers. Furthermore, the Council determined that African-American children of single mothers display fewer deficits than white children, which may be due to the cultural norm of high involvement of the former with extended family.³⁰³ Additionally, Andrew Samuels writes that two-parent families only make sense as a “practical necessity” when kids live in families isolated from larger community networks – which is what occurs with the nuclearization of the family unit and policies that entrench this. Samuels suggests that if children interact with a diverse array of humans who contribute to their nurturing, the justification for the necessity of two-parent homes loses its power, especially if the community provides *both* exposure to role models and responsibility for supporting the children.³⁰⁴ Judith Stacey corroborates this idea, saying that “when other parental resources –

³⁰³ Susan E. Chase and Mary F. Rogers, *Mothers and Children: Feminist Analyses and Personal Narratives*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

³⁰⁴ Andrew Samuels, “The Good-Enough Father of Whatever Sex,” in *Feminism and Psychology* 5 (4), 1995: 511-530.

like income, education, self-esteem, and a supportive social environment – are roughly similar, signs of a two-parent privilege largely disappear.”³⁰⁵ Thus, our privatization and promotion of the nuclear family over more extensive and creative kin networks, along with the limitation of a single parent’s ability to provide for and be present with their child, are the true dangers to children.

Family, Capitalism, and Communities of Color

Because the United States promotes the two-parent nuclear family to the neglect and often detriment of extended and alternative kin networks, single parents and their children suffer alienation and atomization, thus undercutting their access to resources that can support their thriving. However, while Susan Chase and Mary Rogers found that black children of single mothers who are raised within extended or fictive kin networks experience fewer deficits than white children in nuclear, atomized female-headed households, this reality of lacking access to resources is augmented for ethnic minorities when their families are nuclearized. The policies that privilege the nuclear family take on a racist tone when read in comparison to cultural norms amongst non-white ethnic groups. Valerie Lehr asserts that the ability to create a privatized household depends on financial resources unavailable to many, especially families without white, male wage-earners.³⁰⁶ Furthermore, Margaret Andersen notes that two incomes do not close the racial wage gap for ethnic minorities.³⁰⁷ As Lehr asserts, the privatized nuclear family

³⁰⁵ Judith Stacey, *In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 60.

³⁰⁶ Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values*, 20.

³⁰⁷ Margaret L. Andersen, “Feminism and the American Family Ideal,” 242.

structure best fulfills needs and desires of a particular (privileged and patriarchal) group.³⁰⁸ To offset these discrepancies, kinship networks, fictive kin, and “exchanges of support” persist amongst communities of color in the United States, to which ethnographic data attests.³⁰⁹ Two out of three of the ethnic minorities who participated in interviews for this project indicated that in their experiences of their culture, families, and minority-led church communities, early or premarital pregnancy is not a particularly shameful thing but that these communities rally around the pregnant woman. One of the respondents, a pastor and counselor to victims of family violence, said that in black churches, women unite around pregnant women and provide a “familial covering.” According to her, this supportive response is “the very nature of the black family.” Interestingly, she equates the church community with family and uses this term to refer to support beyond just the spiritual. Historically, says the respondent, black people have leaned on one another, and a “familial glue” exists in the African-American church so that children grow up referring to friends as “auntie” or “uncle”. These fictive kin provide child care, emotional and spiritual support and guidance, material provision, housing, and more for unmarried mothers and their children. In extended and fictive kin networks, women hold a central position as mothers and “othermothers”, female relatives and friends who participate in communal childrearing, and reciprocity or exchanges of help and support hold high importance.³¹⁰

Corroborating the notion that children need extensive support and kin networks, one interview respondent, a woman of color, posits that children need a diverse support network, a

³⁰⁸ Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values*, 20.

³⁰⁹ Natalia Sarkisian and Naomi Gerstel, *Nuclear Family Values, Extended Family Lives: The Power of Race, Class, and Gender*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 20.

³¹⁰ Natalia Sarkisian and Naomi Gerstel, *Nuclear Family Values, Extended Family Lives*, 20.

unit of different people to guide them and provide for them. Ethnic minorities are indeed more likely to live in, rely on, or help extended families than are white families.³¹¹ But, as policy formation ignores those beyond the immediate biological family who may support one another, ethnic minorities suffer even more than white single mothers from the privileging of the nuclear family. For example, many poor families only survive through sharing, but sharing state benefits may result in either the loss of these benefits or prosecution for fraud.³¹² Even when these ethnic minorities achieve middle-class status, extended family may rely on their economic support, so the presumption built into government assistance that one only needs benefits for their nuclear family is inaccurate and harmful.³¹³

Significantly, though, white single mothers are increasingly involved with their extended families in contemporary American culture, even as the idea of the middle-class, autonomous nuclear family becomes more idealized and promoted by metanarratives, systems, and policies. Evidence points to reciprocal kinship relations being linked more to class than to ethnicity. Based on data collected in 2004, 2006, and 2007, the National Survey of Families and Households discovered that social class rather than ethnicity or culture was a more significant factor in determining differences between ties to and interactions with extended families displayed by white families and minorities.³¹⁴ Likewise, Katherine S. Newman concludes that “[race] yields little effect independent of socioeconomic position. Families that face similar

³¹¹ Ibid., 21.

³¹² Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values*, 20.

³¹³ Isabel Wilkerson, “Middle Class Blacks Try to Grip a Ladder while Lending a Hand,” *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Anthology*, 3rd edition, ed. Paula Rothenberg, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995).

³¹⁴ Natalia Sarkisian and Naomi Gerstel, *Nuclear Family Values, Extended Family Lives*, 29-30.

material conditions will tend to have similar family organizations.”³¹⁵ This data suggests that single motherhood is indeed linked to social class and that single mothers – and other families – of the same class have more in common with one another across racial lines than do white families of differing social classes.

Historically, we have seen that racial minorities are more likely to live in extended or fictive kin networks than are white Americans, but the aforementioned evidence communicates more about the racialized systems of social-economic oppression than about cultural differences. White Americans are increasingly likely to maintain strong, active ties to extended and fictive kin, and this may be due to the erosion of the middle class in the United States, leading many families of all ethnicities to lean heavily on wider social and familial networks. Recognizing that all kinds of families – of all races and ethnicities, single parents and two-parent families alike – are turning to more communal-based networks of support, whether that be through fictive kin or actual extended or multi-generational family networks and households, provides important evidence to motivate deep solidarity, to use Joerg Rieger’s term, with single mothers. According to the concept of deep solidarity, we unite together not merely out of altruism, compassion, or empathy – as in solidarity – but out of a recognition that we are all in the same boat and that we share common enemies and root struggles, despite our differences and the nuanced and disparate manifestations of these differences due to intersectionality. Realizing the effectiveness of communal living and the problems attendant with isolating nuclear families throws into relief the detriment of policies and systems that benefit those families who can afford to embody the “middle class ideal” of the two-parent nuclear family: such policies do not benefit the majority of hard-working people, nor do they represent reality. In other words, we can all unite to fight a

³¹⁵ Katherine S. Newman, *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. and Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), 192-193.

common enemy of a broken system that makes socioeconomic well-being and actual power and control over one's status and security a struggle, even an impossibility, to maintain. But just as importantly, understanding that because the middle class is becoming mythological rather than actual deconstructs the stigma and stereotypes attached to racial minorities who organize in extended social and familial networks, as well as single mothers who do so. Moreover, if the majority of Americans suffer similar struggles of navigating life as a nuclear family, no matter their employment status, then this demystifies the struggles of female heads of household. No longer should these be seen as natural outcomes of moral deviance but rather struggles common to most of the world – even most Americans – who adhere to the idealized norms of family structure and prominent morality codes.

Even though single mothers predominate amongst the poor and working poor, regardless of ethnicity, and thus rely more heavily than married couples on more extensive support and familial networks, the marital privilege in our social, economic, and political systems have an undeniable racial bias. For one, communal identities and responsibilities and ties to extended kin are in fact an historical staple of Asian, African, and Latino cultures. Secondly, a lack of economic resources increases the need of single-parent families to receive practical help from relatives and also increases their willingness to reciprocate and thus strengthen these ties. Black and Latina families and single mothers are even more likely than white single mothers to lack economic resources that allow the privatization and separation that the nuclear family requires.³¹⁶ Valerie Lehr corroborates this idea by discussing how blaming single parents for social troubles and diminishing support for them while promoting the two-parent, marital family is both a class- and race-based issue:

³¹⁶ Natalia Sarkisian and Naomi Gerstel, *Nuclear Family Values, Extended Family Lives*, 31.

The glorification of two-parent families is not a neutral, innocent discourse; it has been a central discourse in blaming African Americans for not making greater economic strides in the United States, and as a result for the failure of black communities to raise ‘appropriately’ masculine men...[It] remains almost a commonsense notion in American life that black families remain disproportionately poor because they are disproportionately single parent families.³¹⁷

Lehr contends that the connection between the idealization of the two-parent family goes hand-in-hand with metanarratives of the welfare mother and uncontrolled sexuality that often take on a distinctly racist tint and that serve to undermine the support networks of racial minorities that may allow them to ascend the class hierarchy without conforming to the nuclear family structure. She points out that the reductions to social welfare expenditures have largely focused on programs for women and children, which are, by and large, associated with single mothers, and the justification for targeting these programs is “coupled with a moralizing discourse” that creates a connection between women’s and children’s poverty, economic structures, and political decisions. According to this discourse or metanarrative, the “welfare mother” is the very image of the “failed woman” – a woman whose children deserve only minimal public support and who themselves deserve condemnation.³¹⁸

Black and Latina women have indeed experienced higher rates of out-of-wedlock childbearing for longer in history than white women. In *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race before Roe v. Wade*, Ricki Solinger maintains that after World War II, white women were less likely than black women to be single mothers who required welfare because the social norms of the time encouraged white pregnant women who were unmarried to put their babies up for adoption. White babies were, at this time, a valuable commodity, given the anxiety over the

³¹⁷ Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values*, 111.

³¹⁸ Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values*, 112.

decline of the “national stock” in the United States.³¹⁹ Because black and Latina women were more likely to identify with and rely upon extensive networks of biological and fictive kin, the policies, social norms, and Christian metanarratives that began ramping up their encouragement of the nuclear family structure during this very time period as the antidote to social evils and the path to prosperity proved destructive to not only these mothers’ resources for success but also their image and reputation. Additionally, in the latter half of the twentieth century, when evangelical Christianity and conservative politics increased their focus on and communicated heightened fear of sexuality, black women became targets for those who shape public opinion, serving to warn of consequences of exercising sexual agency in ways that deviated from the predominant ideology.³²⁰ They became “the abject”, to use Julia Kristeva’s term to delineate individuals who are constructed as cautionary tales, threats, and monstrosities.³²¹

This construction of minority single mothers as “the abject” – immoral, fraudulent, and dangerous – and the refusal of policies, procedures, and metanarratives to recognize the validity of alternative and extended family structures serves not only as a cautionary tale to bolster a metanarrative that upholds a patriarchal distribution of power and resources but also to increase the economic status and power of the American economy. According to Lehr, the mandatory work requirements of the American welfare system, the social pressure upon single mothers to find employment outside the home rather than focusing their energies on raising their children, and the vital necessity of single mothers to find employment to make ends meet for their children

³¹⁹ Ricki Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race before Roe v. Wade*, (New York: Routledge, 1992).

³²⁰ Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values*, 113.

³²¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

all create a supply of low-wage labor. Statistically speaking, women of color are more likely than white women to occupy low-income and service positions.³²² With a labor pool of single mothers who often have less job options due to childcare and domestic responsibilities and less bargaining power due to their need for work that may prevent them from searching for the highest-position or waging job offers against each other for higher pay, employers are able to maximize their profits by keeping overhead and payroll low while keeping production high. Significantly, this low-wage labor pool has a disproportionate representation from single mothers as well as women of color. Additionally, when society is organized into nuclear family units through policies and cultural and religious metanarratives that only recognize this unit as legitimate, this actually raises the national gross domestic product. In fact, if more people lived in extended families, the GDP would decline because family members would provide more services for free. Thus, atomized families increase the GDP since they are forced to purchase more services.³²³

When reading single mothers' experiences of stigmatization, alienation, and economic, social, and political struggles and pressures in comparison to the status and experiences of single mothers in other cultures and countries, we may surmise that single motherhood and the attendant disenfranchisement and social ills are in fact constructs specific to the United States and other spaces that replicate the metanarrative of the singular ideal of the two-parent, male-headed nuclear family. Significantly, too, the countries and spaces, like the United States, that construct metanarratives to justify policies and systems that privilege the male-headed nuclear family and two-parent families to the neglect of other forms effectively reify an ideology that

³²² Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values*, 113.

³²³ "Why the Nuclear Family Needs to Die, in Order for Us to Live," History, Future. Now. October 5, 2012., www.historyfuturenow.com/wp/why-the-nuclear-family-needs-to-die-in-order-for-us-to-live/

vilifies single mothers as “the abject” that, rooted in sin, perpetuate sin in their children and communities. Thus, by this logic, to support or ameliorate the struggles of single mothers would attenuate the strength and morality of the nation – as well as of the Christian church, by certain logics. However, the systems that privilege the nuclear family are inextricably tied to patriarchy, and they privilege certain men – and certain women, too – while distancing the vast majority of us from power, influence, and control over these systems. Furthermore, though many men and women benefit from the systems in place that feature top-down, male-controlled, and male-determined flows of power, they benefit to varying degrees, and white men of upper classes – those with the power to influence and control decision-making, norms, and advantages in economics, society, government, culture, religion, and the family – benefit disproportionately from the maintenance of the status quo.

The fact that many of us benefit some – though not equally – serves to pacify our sense of injustice and quells urges to strive for social change by giving us something to lose, a benefit tenuously held but desperately needed, should we anger the power center or forfeit our domination of others lower than us in the socioeconomic hierarchy, thus surrendering the modicum of power we felt we had. In this next section, I will analyze the experiences of Christian single mothers in the United States to offer an interpretation of their stories that traces common threads in their struggles, relationships with their churches, senses of their religion’s responses to single motherhood, and hopes and suggestions for empowerment of single mothers. Notably, while almost all of the interview participants mention social-economic struggles like poverty, lack of time with their children, or judgment from others, most of the respondents tended to focus on coming to terms spiritually with their positions as single parents and developing theologies that promote in single mothers an awareness of reconciliation or rightness

with God and the Church. This is a vital and necessary piece to cultural change but also may suggest an acceptance of the struggles faced by single mothers, which might be due to a number of factors, discussed in the next section.

“When We Fall...”: Single Mothers in the Christian Church

Jessica*, a full-time team lead for a Dallas-based company and undergraduate student, found out she was pregnant three weeks before she turned twenty-one. Shortly after, she was let go from a contract job and moved home with her mother and father, the latter with whom she had a strained relationship. Her pregnancy was a high-risk one, and she gave birth to her daughter more than two months early, almost losing her own life in the process. In the midst of all of this, the father of her child was completely absent and apparently had not even told anyone that Jessica was pregnant.

“Dads have it easy and can hide that they get someone pregnant, while women don’t,” Jessica muses. To cope with the mounting pressures of single motherhood, a premature baby, and recovery from her own near-death experience, Jessica began going to church, a habit she had temporarily ceased as an adult after becoming a Christian as a young teenager and faithfully attending a Baptist church with a friend. Naturally, she returned to the denomination that had been most influential to her spiritual journey as a youth. Tearfully, though, she recalls how the minister gave a sermon on single parents and abortion that “made [her] feel low” and shamed for being a single mother. There is a stigma in Christianity, Jessica intelligently expresses, that causes unwed mothers to be looked at differently than other people, women, and mothers – and, specifically, to be looked down upon.

“Christians shouldn’t riddle you with hate,” Jessica states emphatically, “which is how I felt.”

One of the greatest travesties to unmarried mothers is the loss of support of Christianity and the Church as a resource not only of material and spiritual support but also of counternarratives that irrupt the hegemony of patriarchy and androcentrism upon which unjust economic and political systems are based. This hegemony is often furthered through Christian ideologies concerning family, morality, and being. Put simply, single mothers often look to their faith for stories, examples, and messages that can dismantle the shame they feel from their internalization of messages regarding single parenthood, sexuality, and premarital pregnancy – stories that affirm their identities and their goodness as single mothers. Without seeing themselves and their experiences reflected positively in stories, interpretations of Scripture, leaders, or even in ministries and programs, Christian single mothers often experience an unbearable shame – ameliorated only if they accept the message that they have sinned and can be reborn by repentance. Then, they may find respite from shame as a penitent former sinner, but their single motherhood remains rooted in shame. These theologies do not redeem the single mother as single mother, nor affirm the courage of the choices she makes, the selflessness of good motherhood, or the self-giving love that strong single parenthood requires.

Theology that supports heteronormativity, complementarianism, and the nuclear family structure is “proven” to be true and godly by the general tendency for two-parent, male-headed families to be more economically stable than female-headed families. In this section, I relate the stories and experiences of a number of Christian single mothers, most of them involved in or influenced by evangelical Christianity in particular, to discern common themes to their struggles, encounters with Christians or Christian organizations that they found harmful, and messages or

practices that they found helpful. My hope is that their stories will offer a sense of what messages evangelical congregations are sending and supporting that impact single mothers' well-being, how these messages may either validate or challenge problematic metanarratives, social practices, and norms, and what resources these women offer that may be utilized as a counternarrative to the oppression and shaming of single mothers and empower them to seek justice and holistic liberation from their straits and struggles.

Harmful Messages from the Christian Community

Three troubling messages from Christian faith communities seem to predominate: messages urging reconciliation, messages vilifying premarital sex, and messages regarding single-parent ministries that construct these programs as either spiritual restoration or self-help organizations.

1. Reconciliation

Donna, a highly-educated mother of two sons who works for a school district, has been parenting alone since 1998, when she underwent the painful termination of an unhealthy long-term relationship filled with betrayal and dishonesty. She attended church every Sunday and first joined a Singles Ministry, which she said was meaningful to her but not to the church. The church eliminated the Singles Minister position, and the ministry disbanded. In its place, the church promoted a mentoring program for sons of single mothers, pairing her sons with a male volunteer who took them to social events and which Donna found valuable for her children. Additionally, the church hosted a Divorce Recovery Group, and Donna joined. When the group held a session on reconciliation in which an "ideal couple" from the church was invited to share their story of divorce and eventual forgiveness and reconciliation, the leaders of the program

recommended that reconciliation and remarriage between divorced or separated partners with children was best for the whole family. Donna left the session painfully second-guessing her efforts to protect her sons and herself and feeling offended that this path was deemed the ideal for all situations. As a result, Donna quit attending the one group supposedly dedicated to people like her trying to navigate single parenthood.

Another interview participant, Kyle, saw her mother, also a single mother, experience similar pressure to reconcile with an abusive and unfaithful ex-spouse. The members of Kyle's childhood church told her mother, who had kicked her abusive husband out of the home once she discovered that he was also cheating on her, "God will restore this marriage" because they "didn't believe in divorce." When Kyle ended her own unhealthy relationship with her children's father, these same church members turned on her mother, saying, "Now your daughter is divorced too," thus blaming Kyle's mother for starting what they viewed as a cycle of sin.

This kind of push for reconciliation or remarriage is rooted in an ideology of gender complementarianism that has become divinized and theologized in Christian circles, and its attendant "essentialization" of the female sex as naturally desiring male headship and companionship encourages feminism and single mothers' contentment and pride to be viewed as improper and even dangerous. Maggie Gallagher, former president of the National Organization for Marriage and a former single mother herself, asserts that all single mothers desire a husband and provider. In an interview with Molly Worthen, Gallagher alleges that single mothers often vote Democrat because they are raising their children alone and need help, and when Barack Obama was President of the United States, these women viewed him as a sort of father or husband figure to them, providing social services and benefits that ought to be the responsibility

of a husband.³²⁴ As Worthen writes, many single mothers with whom she spoke viewed feminism “as a cult of self-love that denies women’s basic yearning, not to be free, but to be secure.”³²⁵ One of these, Jennifer Turpin-Miller, states that it is not God’s design that women raise children on their own but that “feminism says, ‘We’re so independent, we don’t need anybody.’”³²⁶ Aside from a view of feminism seemingly based upon popular misconstruings of the movement’s aims, these arguments hinge upon a mythologized and mystified metanarrative of gender essentialism and gender complementarianism. Additionally, they play upon middle-class, neoliberal ideals of security and stability as the ultimate goal and good. Finally, in this message regarding single motherhood, the sin or mistake lies with the abandoning male and possibly also with the single mother, not in a system that makes it close to impossible for single mothers to provide for their families and achieve self-actualization. Without focusing on the absence of males as the cause of single mothers’ struggles, this ideology would have to deal with how the plight of single mothers undermines the metanarrative of capitalism and the American Dream: that with hard work and devotion to God and the United States, one is free to achieve anything.

Another prominent message disseminated by evangelical Christian circles is that single motherhood results from sin. As a shaming discourse, this idea focuses on premarital sex as a sin and views the struggles of single mothers as the natural repercussions of immoral choices – which, in a sort of circular reasoning, are interpreted as evidence that sex outside of marriage is in fact sinful and destructive. Jenell Paris researches sexual behavior amongst evangelical

³²⁴ Molly Worthen, “Single Mothers with Family Values,” *The New York Times*, October 26, 2013, accessed February 2, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2013/10/27/opinion/sunday/single-mothers-with-family-values.html

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Ibid.

Christians and whether this is congruent with or deviant from evangelical messages regarding sexuality. According to Paris, churches resort to shame and fear regarding the exercise of sexuality outside of marriage because these Christians are afraid that people would not exercise self-control and prudence unless they stood to lose something valuable like honor, family, church affection – even eternal life. Thus, evangelicals often present an either-or mentality that makes chastity the ideal and depicts premarital sex as a failure.³²⁷ When churches encounter a single mother, especially one who has become pregnant outside of marriage, they feel that failing to communicate their stance on premarital sex as sinful and offering instead unqualified grace or support for single mothers sends mixed messages. To celebrate single mothers, support policies and practices that ameliorate their struggles, or welcome them without calling attention to their “sin” might encourage others to participate in premarital sex without fear of reprisals or dire consequences. Molly Worthen corroborates this theory regarding the impetus behind shaming messages from evangelical churches. She writes that “since the rise of homes for ‘fallen women’ and unwed mothers in the early nineteenth century, American Christians have worried about their plight with a mixture of compassion and contempt.” According to Worthen, certain single mothers, such as widows and abandoned wives, constitute the “deserving poor”, while others (those who have been divorced or who have never been married) are a “pox on the community, a sign that God’s law had been broken by divorce or extramarital sex.”³²⁸

Jenn, a smart young Asian-American woman raising a toddler while going to school full-time and working full-time in the medical field, has first-hand experience with these shaming messages. Her story began in a private Christian high school where she was “slut-shamed”, to

³²⁷ Jenell Paris, “Both Chastity and Contraception: A Sacred Compromise,” *Christianity Today*, April 27, 2012, accessed January 26, 2016, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/aprilweb-only/chastity-contraception.html

³²⁸ Molly Worthen, “Single Mothers with Family Values.”

use her terminology, by older male students, even though she was a virgin. She felt she had already failed the purity test without ever having sex. Suffering from low self-esteem, Jenn felt alienated from her classmates and longed for connections with others, so she began dating a college student whom she felt she could “save” from his own significant troubles. Halfway through her senior year of high school, Jenn discovered she was pregnant but could not allow her school’s administration to find out, lest they expel her from school, according to both their policy and their precedent. Raised Catholic, Jenn experienced a spiritual awakening in high school that made her feel more connected to evangelical and Protestant expressions of Christianity, and she now identifies as interdenominational. However, in both Catholic and Protestant settings, Jenn has heard messages about the demonization of single mothers. As she relates, she has sat through countless sermons on “living in sin” that say premarital sex and out-of-wedlock pregnancy are not what God wants and that frequently seem to lump unplanned pregnancy with shaming of the LGBT community as their poster children for sinful rebellion. She longs to find a church that has a single mothers’ ministry so that she can have a community to support her, but her own mother has told her that she “felt shame when she had to tell people that her daughter was pregnant but feels even more shame telling people her daughter is not Catholic.” Therefore, because of the extent of the shame Jenn feels she has brought not only to her family but to her social and spiritual community, and due to her desire to redeem herself in the eyes of those she holds in esteem, Jenn is alienated from what she feels could be potential sources of support. Significantly, she believes that these sources of support might be found outside of churches in general, but she is still hopeful that these resources might exist in some churches with different, more progressive approaches to and theologies of sexuality.

However, even those churches that host single-parent ministries are often not enthusiastic supporters of these groups. This is especially true if those in power in the church continue to espouse theologies of personal piety and purity codes as foundational for righteousness, the ideal of the male-headed nuclear family, and the innate goodness of the United States and Western-centered privatized neoliberalism. As Donna's story attests, single-parent ministries are often the first targets of budget cuts in churches. One possible explanation for this is that such ministries do not always boast large numbers of participants, meaning that, to those in decision-making positions, they appear not to have the traction in evangelical communities that other ministries have. Tricia, the founder and leader of a single-parent ministry at a large evangelical congregation in an affluent suburb, said that it was difficult to convince her church to start this ministry for the very reason that they needed a single-parent ministry: the one group that catered to some single parents – a 13-week Divorce Care program - “fell apart” after each group would finish the three-month program, though Tricia had hoped that this ministry would be a jumping-off point for a true single-parent ministry. Furthermore, Tricia says that only about 1% of the congregation publicly identifies as single parents, though, in reality, this figure is closer to 15-20%. The problem is that, as Tricia says, the Christian Church at large does not acknowledge single mothers because it is afraid to “support” divorce or unplanned pregnancy. Because of the church's anxiety about acknowledging and making a space for single parents, congregants fear that disclosing their status or struggles will invite shame and stigmatization.

Jenn's and Tricia's experiences of feeling that single mothers are judged and misunderstood was not uncommon amongst the interview participants. Of the ten participants, nine of them articulated that they felt they had experienced judgment from Christians, particularly in the church. Furthermore, several participants mentioned that they feel that, on a

whole, the Christian Church does not recognize single mothers or is afraid to address single parenting for fear of appearing “tolerant” or promotive of it. Kyle, a mother of two who leads a Christian single-parent parachurch support group, believes that “there are certain things the Christian Church does not want to address.” According to Kyle’s experiences and reflections, “Churches want to present a ‘holy image’ and do not want to recognize what [or who] is actually walking in the door.” However, the underlying idea that the best a church can do is “tolerate” single motherhood – and that celebrating single motherhood is dangerous – is harmful to single mothers and their families. The failure to provide a space or ministry for single mothers further entrenches their feelings of shame, especially in religious circles. For example, Jennifer Maggio, the woman introduced in the first chapter who began Life of a Single Mom Ministries, remembers that there was nothing for single mothers at her own church fifteen years ago, and this made her feel ashamed of her position and led her to leave church altogether for nearly seven years.³²⁹ LaVeda Jones, founder of Praying Single Mothers in Illinois, says that she has experienced the effects of racism in the messages regarding sex and single parenthood. Because of historically damaging claims and stereotypes about black promiscuity, some black pastors have emphasized marriage and condemned premarital sex – and either directly or implicitly single motherhood too. As a result, Jones says that many single mothers do not attend church because they simply do not feel welcome.³³⁰ Churches’ refusal to include, celebrate, and assist single mothers unfairly targets them as the epitome of sexual immorality. Of course, another major issue many persons have with single mothers is the absence of a male partner, which is

³²⁹ Jennifer Maggio, “The Church and the Single Mom,” CBN.com, accessed January 29, 2016, www1.cbn.com/churchandministry/the-church-and-the-single-mom

³³⁰ Molly Worthen, “Single Mothers with Family Values.”

viewed as socially catastrophic and is rooted in a particular view of order and gender roles, but a particular sexual morality is also a main issue at play in the vilification of single mothers. That is, many evangelical Christians are afraid that treating single mothers with regard and positivity will encourage others to participate in sex outside of marriage. However, according to Jamie' Calloway-Hanauer, 80% of unmarried evangelical Christians have had sex, and of these, 44% identify as young, practicing or devout evangelicals.³³¹ What is particularly problematic about this is that the evangelical church espouses anxiety about abortion but denigrates and abandons single mothers who choose to face the stigma in their churches and give birth. In reality, though, unmarried, pregnant women are simply part of a vast majority of young Christians who are engaging in sexual activity before marriage.

The fact that single mothers – the ones who comply with the evangelical anxiety about abortion – are targeted, implicitly or directly, as objects of sin, as Jenn's story attests, reveals not only a strong gender bias but also a devastating complicity with harmful cultural and political messages and practices that marginalize and victimize single mothers and their children. Caryn Rivadeneira points out that analogies about worthlessness and grossness after having sex are common in evangelical circles and connect a woman's worth to her sexual purity.³³² Therefore, when a single, pregnant woman is devalued by her church, which is supposed to be an entity that argues against the cultural devaluing of human life, then oftentimes her fate is sealed. Who will advocate for her if those entrusted to be her spiritual advisors and encouragers, the ministers of God's grace and deliverers of divine messages, will not? According to the National Association

³³¹ Jamie Calloway-Hanauer, "The Age of Abstinence-Only Sex Ed Is Over," *Christianity Today*, July 2013, accessed January 26, 2016, www.christianitytoday.com/women/2013/july/age-of-abstinence-only-sex-ed-is-over.html

³³² Caryn Rivadeneira, "The Real Value of Sex," *Christianity Today*, May 2013, accessed January 27, 2016, www.christianitytoday.com/woman/2013/may/real-value-of-sex.html

of Evangelicals, one in three pregnancies among evangelicals ends in abortion. As Jenell Paris asserts, “If church support is available only when abstinence is practiced or professed, many will either go elsewhere or feign chastity in order to avoid shame or even expulsion...When unintended pregnancy happens, church may be far down the list of potentially helpful places to go, and deservedly so.”³³³ When only about 1% of all churches in America have single-parent ministries, this tendency for single mothers to go elsewhere for support certainly makes sense .

Because of the internalization and external preaching of the metanarrative of the interconnectedness of morality, womanhood, patriotism, and Christianity, the single mother may experience – as the driving force behind her shame – a sense of alienation from God. If the community, the Church, and the (male-headed) family feature as representatives of the Divine, as the metanarrative would present it, then the single mother has no choice but to feel as though she has failed God and forfeited her relationship with the Divine by having a physical relationship with a sexual partner. She has heard the equation of sexual immorality with premarital sex and success in the market system; her “moral failure” results in her inability to achieve her potential in the system, which, because the existence of the market system and “family values” are touted by the power center as being divinely ordered, can be attributed to God’s will. The guilty will flounder while the righteous prosper.

But the failure of churches to provide space and support for single mothers in an organized, explicit fashion also poses some possible theological inconsistencies. If one of the main reasons for the reputed anxiety regarding supporting single motherhood comes from a strongly-held belief in the singular morality of “abstinence-only” before marriage, this position may stand on shakier biblical ground than its proponents recognize. Andy Gill argues that

³³³ Jenell Paris, “Both Chastity and Contraception: A Sacred Compromise.”

premarital sex is never explicitly condemned in either the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament. Instead, he asks, “What if the laws and rules we’ve established around this idea of premarital sex were more of a cultural normality than any biblical mandate?” Gill contends that when Christians feel as though they are struggling spiritually or are distant from God, this might be more due to “our churches’ misguided moralistic teachings” than to the way one is living. Furthermore, he asserts that Christians, especially in evangelical circles, have dogmatized the Bible and made it a damaging black-and-white list of rules.³³⁴ Caryn Rivadeneira echoes this by arguing that, contrary to popular Puritan-descended evangelical messages about sexual purity, premarital sex does not “tie our souls” to our partners and thus lead to fragmented souls when a relationship ends, nor does it ruin people’s lives.³³⁵ Instead, the repercussions created by society that stigmatize those who have sex – and who bear the markers of premarital sex in the form of pregnancy or single parenthood – have the potential to harm lives. In other words, our treatment of one another is more apt to ruin lives than premarital sex.

In addition to challenging the theological and biblical basis of this particular morality of sexuality, some Christians concerned about the plight of single mothers are emphasizing the biblical duty of churches to care for the poor and oppressed. For example, Angeli R. Rasbury argues that the Bible says churches and Christians should serve the less fortunate and help the hurting and marginalized, mentioning Scripture verses such as Galatians 5:13, I Peter 4:10, and John 13:14 as evidence.³³⁶ Likewise, Jennifer Maggio cites Psalm 146:19, Luke 14:13, and I

³³⁴ Andy Gill, “Is Premarital Sex Sinful,” Patheos, November 2, 2014, www.patheos.com/blogs/andygill/is-premarital-sex-sinful/

³³⁵ Caryn Rivadeneira, “The Real Value of Sex.”

³³⁶ Angeli R. Rasbury, Mary Ignatius, and Rita Henley Jensen, “Single-Mom Ministries Expand Their Place in Church,” Women’s eNews, April 13, 2015, accessed February 10, 2017, <http://womensenews.org/2012/12/single-mom-ministries-expand-their-place-in-church/>

Timothy 5:3 as commanding care for the poor, widows, and orphans, arguing that single mothers and their families fall under these categories.³³⁷ Although some of my interview participants shared views regarding sexuality differing from predominant evangelical moralities that vilify premarital sex, others espoused more traditional moralities, though they did not feel their “sin” of having premarital sex discredited their current spiritual standing or their devotion to their faith. However, all of the interview participants agreed that churches ought to provide ministries specifically for single mothers. In my research, I feel there are two significant problems with the conception and operation of the single-parent ministries that I have encountered in this project.

First, single-parent ministries are often conceived to be a charity effort by the church, incumbent upon them due to Scripture texts that command them to care for “the least of these.” Though the categorization of single mothers as the less fortunate, the hurting, and the poor is, in many cases, entirely accurate and helpful to the cause of bringing aid to single mothers, the efforts of single-parent ministries focus on acts of mercy rather than acts of justice. In other words, the categorization of single mothers as oppressed remains stagnant and unchallenged, so that they remain objects of care and charity. There exists no impetus to question why this pattern of single mothers being materially needy has to occur. Instead, it is either taken for granted as a natural consequence of deviance that ought to be ameliorated by good-hearted and better-off Christians, or else it is treated as a problem that can be overcome by individual and particularly determined single mothers. Single-parent ministries often operate with these two options in mind. Thus, such ministries seem to either exist to provide for the needs of single-parent families, much like a food pantry or homeless shelter would, or they focus on spiritual restoration and individual empowerment of the single mother. Examples of the first case include

³³⁷ Jennifer Maggio, “The Church and the Single Mom.”

a Michigan Vineyard Church that connected 26 female-headed families with a person, family, or group who helped with Christmas shopping or invited them to meals and encouraged them throughout the year. This church also allows single mothers and their children monthly access to its “Pink Bag Boutique”, where they get free access to items like toilet paper, Kleenex, toothpaste, and laundry detergent that food stamps cannot buy.³³⁸ While such ministries have their place and are helpful, they seem to function with some important ambivalence: they stop at providing for these families’ immediate needs and take for granted that single mothers will face financial, practical, and social struggles as a result of their deviance from a monolithic metanarrative of family-structure normality. In other words, this is charity without justice, without the effort to eradicate the uneven playing field that single mothers face.

In the experiences of my interview participants, the second case, in which churches focus on spiritual restoration and individual empowerment, seemed to predominate. These ministries emphasize the spiritual condition of single mothers and view social and financial success as an attainable possibility for these women. Thus, they often offer budgeting and life skills courses alongside divorce-recovery and Celebrate Recovery programs, counseling, and Bible study. The basic message is that determination is the key and often missing ingredient to achieving stability and success, and outward flourishing is a sign of the single mother’s increasing sanctification and spiritual restoration. While these ministries do espouse a group dynamic, this communalism is limited to being viewed as a sort of support group, rallying around the woman to encourage her individual journey, rather than as a sort of collective identity that recognizes a common oppression at the hands of a patriarchal theology and society. Solidarity and communal

³³⁸ Angeli R. Rasbury, Mary Ignatius, and Rita Henley Jensen, “Single-Mom Ministries Expand Their Place in Church.”

responsibility are missing; instead, accountability, encouragement, and mentoring are emphasized as the primary roles of the church community in the lives of single mothers.

Additionally, in these groups, there is not a strong sense of responsibility for the plight or success of single mothers as a whole; instead, success or failure has to do with the individual woman's relationship with God and personal choices in the quotidian. As Helene Slessarev-Jamir and Bruce Ellis Benson state, "where money is an idol, to be poor is a sin."³³⁹ The assumption is that suffering is caused by personal sin (in this case, sex outside of marriage), but it can be alleviated by redemption, so that once a single mother expresses repentance or experiences some spiritually-motivated transformation, her financial and social suffering can then be ameliorated. The curse is lifted, and the woman is in the right mindset to get to work creating her own success. Her community is a tool for empowering her individual success.

This assumption that single mothers' primary and most pressing struggles are spiritual – and, implicit in this, the notion that single mothers have, in some way, an impoverished or troubled relationship with God or Christianity – is reflected in many single-parent ministry leaders' priorities and messages. For example, Jennifer Maggio says that single mothers' real challenge "is not income inequality, but their relationship with the Lord."³⁴⁰ Not only is this assumption derogatory and condescending towards single mothers, but it also bifurcates and compartmentalizes spiritual and material struggles, giving greater weight to the former and neglecting the latter. While many Christian ministries openly espouse that spiritual struggles may lead to material, physical problems, there appears to be a reluctance to recognize that the latter often precedes the former. In other words, rather than single mothers' supposed apostasy or

³³⁹ Helene Slessarev-Jamir and Bruce Ellis Benson, "The Contested Church: Multiple Others of Evangelical Multitude," 39.

³⁴⁰ Molly Worthen, "Single Mothers with Family Values."

sinfulness leading to physical manifestations of inner turmoil (cited as poverty, relationship trouble, or premarital pregnancy), it is worth considering that devout single women may at times become pregnant, and when this happens, the poverty, alienation, and oppression they experience may communicate to them spiritual messages that make them feel ashamed and distanced from God and their faith community. In this case, it is important to note that physical oppression has spiritual and theological implications and repercussions in American evangelical culture..

Furthermore, the focus that these single-parent ministries have on the individual as solely responsible for sin and success reproduces the neoliberal canon of privatization that undermines the Christian value of community and simultaneously ignores communal, systemic responsibility for social ills and oppression. While premarital sex is treated as though it is an infectious sin that can discredit the sanctity and testimony of a church or community, and while single motherhood is blamed for society-wide ills like rising crime, poverty, and mental illness, there appears to be no symmetrical awareness of how other sins like greed, racism, sexism, , and pride might have systemic, community-wide repercussions that may actually create the very struggles for which single mothers are blamed. Furthermore, while single mothers are blamed for causing communal upheaval, their “redemption” and striving for “success” is considered a personal, privatized pursuit for which the community bears no real responsibility.

In my research, I attended the meeting of a single-parent ministry that met on Sunday mornings as a program of a large, reputedly multi-ethnic congregation with a predominantly white leadership. The class consisted of over twenty attendees, the majority of whom were females, though about a quarter of the attendees were male, and two participants brought their young children. For the Sunday in which I was attendance, the message of the curriculum used for the class was “Starting Over: How to Make Sure Next Time Won’t Be Like Last Time.” The

video presented to the class stated that there are three keys to “doing better”: 1) Owning our role in our negative history, 2) Rethinking our past habits, tendencies, role, and approaches, and 3) Releasing our blame of others for our past. According to the video, the phrase “I screwed up” is a single parent’s best bet for the future. The message likened blaming anyone outside ourselves for any negativity in our past with Adam and Eve’s blaming of each other in Genesis and claimed that strong emotions conjured up by recollections of past pain distort our clear-mindedness and ability to make sound decisions. Additionally, the video asserted that if we admit our part in any negative experience, we can no longer remain angry at others or about that experience. Based on this presentation, it appears that this ministry was communicating that single parents needed to accept blame for their struggles, and in so doing, would be laying claim, in a sense, to control over their situations so that they might better them. A message of ambivalent quality, certainly there are positive elements to this. For one, honestly evaluating situations for the roles that one plays in harming themselves or others is vital to personal development and growth, as well as to promoting an ethical and humanitarian world. For another, there is some truth to the idea that if we are part of the problem, we also have the power to change the problem or situation, whereas if we have no role in perpetrating the suffering or injustice, it is oftentimes more difficult to rectify this wrong. However, this push for feeling as though we control our own destiny is a problematic and untruthful cliché of neoliberal American idealism that hides the function, flow, and hoarding of power amongst a certain group to the neglect of others. It also privatizes and focuses blame and success as the ultimate responsibility of the single parent while absolving larger systems and their supporters of their roles in creating inequality, bias, and oppression. Finally, it makes anger and indignation – or any sentiment that might provide a ground for social

action against harmful systems, policies, metanarratives, and power centers – seem to be anti-Christian, petty, self-indulgent, and ultimately self-sabotaging.

Although single-parent ministries in churches are arguably a step in the right direction in terms of evangelical congregations recognizing and offering support to single mothers, most of the churches represented by interview participants seemed inclined to these ministries as “special-interest groups” rather than ministries that are integral or of interest to the church as a whole. They are viewed as serving subsets of their congregation or as demonstrative of an ethic of care for “the least of these” rather than as ministries that inform the direction or identity of the church as a whole. The plight of those who utilize single-parent ministries is seen to be unique to those within that group, similar to the way many respite ministries are constructed – as a service provided to families who are dealing with special circumstances.

In contrast, three of the women interviewed hail from the same evangelical congregation – one that does not have a single-parent ministry. However, this church, though still majority-white, has embraced a vision of being a multi-ethnic congregation, and to that end, they have created a racial reconciliation group that meets regularly to advise the church as to how they can better embody this identity and address racial injustice. Furthermore, they host churchwide and community-wide events, such as racial-reconciliation trainings, multi-ethnic celebrations, guest speakers, and panels to discuss, raise awareness about, and take action for racial justice and equality. This represents an example of how a church is recognizing that an issue faced more overtly by a numerical minority of its members – racism – is a systemic and both material and theological issue that impacts and implicates all congregants and the Christian church as a whole.

Class and patriarchy – which have inscribed themselves upon single mothers and their existence – are imprinted upon all of us and determine much of our own lived realities. Far from

being a “special interest”, many of these reproduce the logic of neoliberal capitalism rather than logics that seem more germane to historically-valued Christian ethics. Alternative logics of Christian ethics could include a communitarian spirit, opposition to top-down, oppressive, flows of power that, to the benefit of a select few, prevent the ability of the many and marginalized to assert and carry out their will and decisions, and a non-dualistic worldview that links the spiritual and physical. Instead, glimmers of these values appear selectively and inconsistently – enough to gesture at adherence to these values, but not fully or radically enough to constitute a challenge to American cultural systems and metanarratives of privatized and personal success as a result of hard work and as an outward demonstration of inner repentance and divine favor. For example, a small group in Ryan’s large nondenominational church took up a collection to provide money for Ryan to move and stock her apartment with food when her relationship with the father of her children ended, and her best friend got her a daycare registration waiver when she could not afford child care. This is a glimmer of the sort of assistance that, should other single mothers be given access to it, could be revolutionizing for female heads of household and their families. And yet, there seems to be a failure of recognition amongst these ministries that the lack of access to basic necessities systematically denied female heads of household not only communicates to these women that they are sinful and causally responsible for their struggles but also warrants more than a privatized, isolated gesture of charity. As Marcella Althaus-Reid argues in *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics*, the social analysis of poverty as merely an economic – or in this case, both an economic and moral-spiritual problem – without considering the sexual and gendered dimensions serves to retrench poverty by mystifying the complex and imbricated web and intersections of relationships that produce conditions of

inequality, poverty, and privilege.³⁴¹ What is needed from Christians and their communities is a widespread critique of an oppressive system.

Social Justice for Single Mothers?: What Inhibits the Formation of Social Movements for Female Heads of Household?

Although they largely leave assistance to single parents at the level of either benevolence or a focus on spiritual health, with material support only peripherally and selectively entertained, single-parent ministries may challenge to some extent the exclusion of single mothers from inclusion in, tolerance by, or encouragement or assistance from the Christian Church. However, there are few explicit theologies or messages that liberate unmarried mothers from the shame leveraged against them by metanarratives regarding premarital sex, divorce, and the male-headed nuclear family structure. Furthermore, there appears to be an avoidance of a concerted effort to challenge an oppressive status quo and extant social structures that categorically marginalize single mothers. Even though the Christian Church has an ambivalent relationship with progressive, identity-based, or liberation social movements, there is ample precedent of evangelical congregations eventually joining these efforts, while some marginalized evangelical churches and individuals even took leadership roles in them. For example, the Black Church was fundamental in the American Civil Rights Movement, with some white congregations serving as allies. Overseas, Christian churches and leaders composed the Kairos Document, and a group called Concerned Evangelicals followed suit in explicitly opposing and challenging apartheid in South Africa. Even more recently, churches have been at the forefront of the living wage movement in the United States and are active in working to deconstruct human trafficking. But while many Christians themselves have taken strong stances against patriarchy, Christian

³⁴¹ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics*, (London: Routledge, 2001).

congregations as a whole – and especially evangelical ones – seldom form broad coalitions for women’s rights in the present day. Of course, entities like Sojourners do address gender issues, but the buy-in from local congregations is limited or at least regional.

In a 2016 survey of a snowball sample of 25 American Christian activists involved in progressive social movements like Black Lives Matter, workers’ rights, and LGBTIQ and gender causes, respondents indicated that they did not perceive a strong Christian presence, in terms of numbers or resource provision, in innovative or progressive social movements, especially ones concerning marginalized identities. Many did, however, suggest that Christian activism today largely consists of revivalistic and resistance movements like the pro-life movement, the New Familism movement, and opposition to gay marriage. On the other hand, all but one respondent responded affirmatively when asked if their faith served as motivation for their involvement in social activism, though they also expressed frustration with the absence of a strong collective identity of Christian social activists involved in their causes.³⁴²

What, then, marks the difference between the historical involvement of evangelical Christians in certain progressive or liberation movements, and why might they be reluctant to take social action beyond acts of benevolence on behalf of single mothers? An activist in the American Civil Rights Movement of the twentieth century, Dr. Willie Peterson recalls that during the struggle for civil rights “a little effort yielded a bigger return.” Today, Peterson says, because racial minorities and women have indeed made advances over the past century, the oppression that these groups face becomes more nuanced. Thus, the change that is legitimately still needed is less persuasive on its face.³⁴³ Due to the increasing pervasiveness of neoliberal

³⁴² Haley Feuerbacher, *Google Survey of American Christian Activists*, January 17, 2016.

³⁴³ Willie Peterson, “Interview with Dr. Willie Peterson,” telephone interview by author, December 2, 2016.

privatization and individualism, change is purported to be within the control and power of the individual person, so that any struggles one faces can be overcome with determination, hard work, and adherence to the rules and metanarratives of the existing system in place.

There is a sort of religious faith in the extant systems in the United States and Global North, primarily in those systems that support the myth of individual control of one's circumstances. This becomes theologized in many Christian circles in the United States, and because policies exist that, at face value, support the equality of all humans who choose to obey their appropriate roles within the extant political, social, religious, and economic systems, the assumption is that prejudice as a systemic determinant of who has or does not have access to power and the means to thrive is extinct in American culture. Therefore, when single mothers, for example, propose that there exists in our society a bias against women and particularly female heads of household, they may be taking a stance that runs explicitly contrary to their churches' theology of individual responsibility for one's circumstances and may be accused of blaming others rather than demonstrating a penitent heart. In this case, the single mother might be viewed as being unwilling to be transformed by God's grace and is thus unworthy of aid. In popular language, these women would be viewed as "whining" rather than as challenging legitimately problematic fixtures in our society.

In addition to a current allergy to social action for groups who have already "achieved" advances in American culture, another hurdle to single mothers uniting for social action on their own behalf is the current construct of both a patriarchal and a neoliberal society that creates significant difficulties for pursuing unpaid work that involves a significant investment of time, effort, and resources. As Peterson pointed out, the Civil Rights Movement certainly necessitated profound sacrifices and substantial investment, but it also yielded notable returns on even smaller

efforts, since the oppression of black Americans was overt, easily recognizable, and acute. With women's rights – and specifically those of single mothers, injustice, inequality, and oppression are harder to spot and thus harder to remedy, and so activism requires a longer and less frequently rewarding investment. In her article "Women's Working Poverty: Feminist and Religious Alliances in the Living Wage Movement," C. Melissa Snarr explores the realities of women's involvement in activism while parenting. She finds that the lack of structural support like health care, child care, vocational development, and other benefits for female organizers means that women must make sacrifices in order to be activists, and such sacrifices are often impossible for female heads of household. Thus, women activists may often find their efforts unsustainable and burn out.³⁴⁴ Combined with Peterson's observation that the payoff for social action for women in the United States today comes slower, with more considerable effort, and more subtly, the substantial short-term costs of long-term investment in grassroots activism for single mothers' empowerment and rights may appear to outweigh the great good that may come after a sustained and arduous effort – especially when the needs of the female activists' children are involved.

Furthermore, Christian theology plays a significant role in many women's reluctance to advocate for themselves. Snarr discovered that, while women have historically and contemporarily taken leading or integral roles in social movements, these are often causes that focus on benefiting others. As Snarr points out, Christian rhetoric often encourages sacrifice for others – but not for oneself, and activism certainly involves considerable investment of time and resources with little immediate return. Because of the dearth of well-paying and well-supported positions in social activism and related non-profit organizations, mothers, perhaps especially

³⁴⁴ C. Melissa Snarr, "Women's Working Poverty: Feminist and Religious Alliances in the Living Wage Movement," 76.

unmarried ones, may find it difficult to justify pursuing work in these areas. Additionally, even volunteering in activism often requires long nights and weekend events and meetings that conflict with family responsibilities and needs.³⁴⁵ Beyond the impossibility of involvement in activism that these hurdles present to many single mothers, to take on these sacrifices for a cause that benefits themselves is often felt to be selfish.

Yet another possibility as to why there currently exists no significant collective action on the part of Christian groups and single mothers to change realities for female-headed households is that many evangelical circles experience the world as selectively dualistic. That is, according to influential evangelical thought, the Christian institution and the state are not only separated but are actually oftentimes oppositional, with the former representing the spiritual and the latter representing the worldly. Evangelicals try to transform the worldly to be more spiritual, but the two spheres contend with one another in a sort of perennial tug-o'-war. In this relationship, evangelicals are often called to consider the Church the great transformer of society and the healer of social ills, with the government as a fallible and oft-corrupt earthly power that God can use to keep humans safe in spite of its worldliness. However, there exists a mystified mythology of oneness between the Church, the United States and other aspects of “the West”, and capitalist economy that unites these three entities as the “good” to be realized over and against the “reprobate” world. All three are equated with progress, a rather humanistic ideal for Christians. Yet rather than embracing modernism’s optimistic humanism, Christians who advocate for the goodness of capitalism and the United States view these as the new Zion, the ideal, the Promised Land – or at least the tools to creating such – to which we are called to march onward. These are

³⁴⁵ C. Melissa Snarr, “Women’s Working Poverty: Feminist and Religious Alliances in the Living Wage Movement.”

the means to achieving God's goals on earth, but they are also often taken for divine ends, as well. In such belief, the dualism is created between "Christianity" and a world wherein capitalism and its attendant neoliberal tendencies, the United States, and Western culture do not hold sway and where these tools and their associated ends are contested and not taken for God's will. The problematic dualism further separates embodied, material pain and spirituality, and the only "earthly" institutions sanctioned to tend to the former are the economic system and patriarchal, white, and heteronormative Western cultural mores and structures. To attend to the latter – the spiritual condition, the Church is prescribed.

There exists a widespread belief that the Constitution was a divinely-inspired, Christian document and that if the United States operated according to its tenets, the nation would indeed be a sort of holy land or new Canaan. To this end, Christians are called upon to preserve the way of life they believe to be encouraged by this Constitution and may become involved in politics insofar as their mission to preserve American constitutional integrity calls for this. Beyond this, the goal is to limit the influence, power, and control of the government in private citizens' lives. Government influence in citizens' daily existence is thought to interfere with God's work in and through the endeavors of humans – be it in the economy or in civil society. Christianity and church and the happy bedfellows they make with neoliberal capitalism are reputed to be the cure to social ills, and so those living with poverty, hunger, domestic violence, and mental illness are directed to churches rather than laws and policies for the solutions to their problems. Unfortunately, church solutions are often still mired in the mindset that struggles are due to personal failure, ignorance, or reprobation, and answers take the form of charity, spiritual restoration, or self-help rather than a challenge to existing systems, policies, and ideologies.

Constructing a Way Forward: Theological and Practical Resources from Single Mothers and Churches

In the United States, our experiences of Christianity often differ so little from the power imbalances we experience in our daily life that it is difficult to see a) the injustice of this diffuse and multifaceted system, b) that this is not “just the way things are,” and c) that there may be alternatives to this way of being. In terms of the power imbalances latent in our economic system, Joerg Rieger asserts that both mainline economics and mainline theology subscribe to the myth of individualism, which “make it hard for us to see the imperial aspirations of the free market.”³⁴⁶ While single mothers in the United States experience conditions and pressures that might be considered issues of injustice and inequality (prime ingredients for activism), no activism that could be called a movement exists here.

Policy alone does not always translate to widespread cultural change – at least not immediately, and the link between the two is not always stable. Valerie Lehr contends that within civil society, conditions that create discrimination are likely to continue after a state passes legislation. That is, the extension of rights does not necessarily enhance freedom or democracy, and the degree of freedom within a culture prior to the extension of rights is similar to the degree of freedom after the extension of rights.³⁴⁷ For example, South Africa has one of the most progressive Constitutions in the world; when the African National Congress came to power in the early 1990s, ending apartheid and introducing the new democracy, they wrote and ratified a Constitution that offered martial and legal rights and recognition to same-sex couples. However, extensive opposition to the LGBT+ movement remains a considerable concern in South Africa, where corrective rape perpetrated against lesbians happens with alarming

³⁴⁶ Joerg Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future*, 19.

³⁴⁷ Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values*, 39.

frequency. In another example, the waves of the American women's movement have led to the passage of policy decisions such as state-level Equal Rights Amendments, Title IX, and *Roe v. Wade*, but this legislation has not created actual equity or equality between the sexes when it comes to daily realities. The wage gap still exists, men still dominate in arenas and positions of power and decision-making and thus control the distribution of this power and resources, sexual assault is still poorly dealt with on college campuses and faith communities and perpetrated largely by men against women, sexual harassment and violence is rampant in entertainment and other industries, and male athletes still receive more attention and support than female athletes across the board. Furthermore, sexism persists in our language, treatment of one another (regardless of gender), ability to pursue goals, and access to power.

In her text *Queer Family Values*, Lehr contends that change is most likely to be effective when it is a result of cultural norms, which she proposes should occur ideally through political and cultural struggles rather than through legal processes. As she says, our ability to counter hegemonic and exclusionary metanarratives of American identity requires the recognition that fighting political battles for rights alone is inadequate and must be combined with cultural battles. We can fight these, she writes, with an understanding of the importance that dominant constructions of acceptable family structures and sexuality, often perpetuated by influential theologies, play in politics and policy-making.³⁴⁸ Thus, theology is an important tool for shaping ideals and norms, as well as persuading ideological transformation and inspiring social action to

³⁴⁸ Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values*, 38, 105.

convert earthly situations to align with new ideals articulated by counter-theologies that challenge existing metanarratives and realities.

However, a key component in crafting a different culture and attendant norms is creating accessibility to the conversation for people of marginalized demographics – in this case, unmarried mothers. Accessibility is oftentimes, and in the particular case of this project’s interest, directly correspondent with economic power and opportunity. The creation of knowledges, the creation of norms, the creation of differing social organizations, policy, theologies, and rituals that actually have the traction, weight, and visibility to “catch on” enough in wider society to shift the flow of power and the operation of a society all necessitate attendance to the way that neoliberalism, elitism, and economy function insidiously, coercively, exclusively, and patriarchally to prevent the participation of those who might endanger the status quo with their counternarratives. Better policies and practices are certainly a goal, but I am not arguing for this to be done on behalf of those who are suffering. This is just a different form of privilege, charity, and paternalism. What is needed for true power to shift is access to the conversation, room at the table, a chance to lead and direct the table talk, in fact, by introducing new narratives and ideas that trouble the conversation being pored over by those who already find themselves situated around the table but perhaps disturbed by the injustices they see around them in the world. Access, the chance to tell one’s story and create out of that story, and the production of knowledge are all economic endeavors and require economic innovations of inclusion.

In a recent example, at a gathering of the United Methodist Collegiate Ministers Association in 2018, a new author Linda Kay Klein, whose upcoming book *Pure* has already received praise by the popular writer Glennon Doyle, delivered a plenary address on the “purity

ethic” and its “psychological trauma” to young evangelical women. Through compelling and relatable personal narrative, Klein details her journey through the terrifying and isolating shame over the association of femaleness and sexuality with an unavoidable and persistent sinfulness that she was socialized to believe in her evangelical youth. She arrives – at last! – at sex positivity and has spent the past decade or so collecting the narratives of others like herself who were scarred by the purity narratives of evangelical Christianity. Yet throughout her engaging presentation, punctuated with descriptions of the psychology of fear and shame and quotes from counseling expert Brene Brown, Klein referred back to the relief she and the others felt every time they took a pregnancy test that came up negative. At one point in the question-and-answer period, a member of the audience asked whether or not she cared to engage the operation of white privilege and the effects of the racist nature of the purity ethic on women of color. Klein responded that she definitely recognized the presence of racism in the purity narrative but lacked the adequate time to address it fully in her address. Another member of the audience stated emphatically into the microphone, “Some of us did get pregnant. And even in this deconstruction of the purity narrative, we are still used as the cautionary tales. Dismantling the narrative is not enough when the systems in place are so unjust that they further entrench the same and othering felt by single mothers – and exclude them from their supposed sex-positive allies.” To this, Klein responded that no one had ever said that to her before. Somehow, in over a decade of fieldwork, she had never engaged a woman who had become pregnant before marriage.

The two respondents to the Klein’s work presented key problems with the current work being done amongst progressive Christians on the purity narratives: those creating the conversation are those who have access to the conversation. In this case, women of color and single mothers remained outside of the construction of this new and supposedly liberating

knowledge of sex positivity – and this liberation theology eased only the psychological trauma of those with the privilege of being allowed to shape the conversation. Even in this, there must be an awareness that psychology is often socially shaped and conditioned by material realities – in this case, measurable, demonstrable repercussions created to benefit those who conform to a norm and cited as evidence of the propriety of said norms and impropriety of deviation. But in all of this deconstructive and constructive work, who is inviting single mothers to speak? Who is making higher education affordable and workable for a single mother so that her story can shape our theologies? Who is noticing the needs for childcare, healthcare, and a living wage so that our cultures and the authoritative messages that shape them like theology represent a fuller picture of what is possible, what is needed, and what could benefit all more greatly than the narrow solutions being spun by those who are only seeking to heal their psychic pain and the pain of those just like them?

There are some who listen and act. Sam Martinez, a Yale doctoral candidate on staff at Candler School of Theology at Emory University, has secured for the first time a scholarship fund for a single mother who will matriculate at Candler in the fall of 2018. His intentionality about creating access to higher education through economic means is a vanguard in the Christian church and the academy, and his idea arose from a conversation with a friend who was a single mother and yearned for access to higher education so that she could create theology from and for women like her. Martinez will continue to work on this initiative and has already engaged with a second single mother who is a prospective student at Candler. As Bridget Walker observes, Christianity often manifests its power as either a force for domestication or for liberation of women. On the one hand, it imposes social codes on the behaviors, roles, and relationships of humans, but on the other, it is many times one of the only spaces in which women can meet

together. Additionally, Walker notes that religion offers opportunities to reflect on the meaning and purpose of life and suffering, prescribes order onto what may feel like an otherwise chaotic world, and provides a means of expressing communal identity. Moreover, religion offers alternatives to dominant models of social, economic, and political development.³⁴⁹ But does it really in our context? If it does offer alternatives in glimmers, how do we increase its potential and reorganize access to political, economic, cultural, and social power to allow a more radical reconstruction and revolution of norms and practices rather than a mere tweaking of church and society?

Resources for Counternarratives in Theologies, Practices, and Experiences of American Christian Single Mothers and Evangelical Communities

The question of why single mothers are disadvantaged can be neglected so long as their existence is seen to be an anomaly; but neglect is not an option when the numbers of single mothers here in the United States are growing quickly – and when more Christians are finding themselves in this situation. Yet without forming a theology that begins from the exigencies of the quotidian experienced by unmarried mothers, Christian narratives, theologies, and practices remain impotent to overturn the ideologies and cultures that produce and perpetuate shame, alienation, injustice, and oppression. The goal of ministries for and efforts to support single mothers should not be to include them or reconcile them with the very system that has rejected them but rather to address the system that produces their alienation and struggles in the first place, as Joerg Rieger asserts in his discussion of economic marginalization.³⁵⁰ Dominant evangelical theologies as they currently exist may have the ability to empower individual women

³⁴⁹ Bridget Walker, “Christianity, Development, and Women’s Liberation,” in *Gender and Development*, vol. 17, no. 1 (March, 1999): 15-22.

³⁵⁰ Joerg Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, 26.

on some level, but they are not fomenting action to eradicate harmful and oppressive practices for single mothers as a whole. One of the main reasons for this is that Christianity in many forms is inextricably intertwined with the power dynamics of the world at large, and one of the main determinants of power in our world is economics. When religion takes for granted the flow of power through our economic system as something incontrovertible and natural – or even divinely ordained, it becomes a sort of civil religion that, in this case, preserves patriarchy, classism, and racism in this neoliberal iteration. Furthermore, it divinizes or mythologizes neoliberal capitalism as the way things ought to be and the path to success and holiness, and it makes this economic model a central feature of American culture and of Christianity. As Rieger argues, what is needed are counternarratives – alternative theologies and practices - such engaging in cooperative economic efforts, socializing education at religiously-sponsored institutions, elevating to power those who are often marginalized, working to end causes of inequality, communalizing responsibility for members' well-being, and centralizing prophetic political action, justice, and speech as an integral and inseparable feature of spiritual life – that destabilize this relationship between Christianity, neoliberal economics, patriarchy, and power:

...[Whether] we can find alternatives and reconfigure the interrelations of economics and religion depends in large part on a return to places similar to those where the initial insights of the pioneers of economic and religious alternatives were forged: places of great pressure. In this context, the contribution of theological and religious reflection to the further development of economics and the tremendous powers that it represents, is not primarily that of providing another set of ideas or a new state of mind, but of finding glimpses of an alternative reality. The best chances for this happen are in places where

the pressures of the economic and ecological status quo become unbearable, and are therefore being challenged.³⁵¹

In other words, it is by doing theology and constructive reorganizing of power from and with and following the lenses of the underside of our world that transformative change for justice may take place.

Innovative social movements are a key way to promote a program for change in societal norms and values and to challenge the legitimacy of institutions and systems and their authority, credibility, and control over the public and persons. Such social movements tend to be organized from the bottom up, by “ordinary people” rather than by powerful figureheads, thus implementing a challenge to top-down flows of power featured in neoliberalism and patriarchy and embodying a communal flow of power, which will be discussed in this section. Single mothers may find themselves already practicing such flows of power in their communal-based social structures. However, according to Charles J. Stewart, Craig Allen Smith, and Robert E. Denton, Jr., to be successful, social movements must raise people’s consciousness by “revealing the moral, intellectual, and coercive bankruptcy of the targeted institution.”³⁵² Additionally, to produce significant, lasting change, social movements must transform perceptions of reality, empower protestors, attain legitimacy, prescribe and “sell” courses of action, mobilize the apathetic, and sustain the movement over time.³⁵³

Conceptualizing single mothers within the Christian church as “hybrids” according to postcolonial feminist theory, I contend that Christian single mothers might be positioned

³⁵¹ Joerg Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, 27.

³⁵² Charles J. Stewart, Craig Allen Smith, and Robert E. Denton, Jr., eds. *Persuasion and Social Movements*, 5th edition, (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 2007).

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 20.

uniquely as both “indecent” or marginalized Christians – just outside of power enough to embody and implement grassroots or bottom-up forms of power and to pose challenges to institutions and power centers without being part of “the establishment” itself, which are necessary characteristics of social movement organizers, as well as members of the institution of the Christian Church, which lends credibility to their cause. By articulating explicitly Christian counternarratives and theologies under the auspices of at least some connection to the recognized authority of the Christian Church, Christian single mothers with an eye to organizing and mobilizing for new social norms and religious beliefs that elevate the experiences of and strive for the rights of single mothers may exploit their hybrid status in an effective way. Equipped with articulate counter-theologies, they satisfy both the need to establish legitimacy by representing their cause as one that any faithful Christian may endorse.³⁵⁴ Their utilization of Christian theology to justify their position, claims, and goals acts as a frame that may attract followers and build on existing social networks within religious communities by connecting their demands with a shared vision of the Christian good. Additionally, by maintaining some connection with the Christian Church, single mothers striving to be activists and agents of social movements are aligning themselves with an institution regarded as a legitimate keeper of social order – one that also holds sway with governmental and other political institutions, as well as the media, which are essential resources for social movement success.³⁵⁵ Yet by operating outside of the power of the Christian Church and as a grassroots movement spearheaded by concerned “ordinary” single mothers, such a social movement would remain uninstitutionalized as a collectivity and would be able to operate outside the established institution of the Christian

³⁵⁴ Charles J. Stewart, Craig Allen Smith, and Robert E. Denton, Jr., eds. *Persuasion and Social Movements*, 17.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

Church, allowing its members the freedom to speak and practice divergent narratives that challenge hegemony. Thus, Christian single mothers appear to possess the potential as hybrids within and yet on the margins of the established power of evangelicalism to parlay their position into an effective social movement, should their collective consciousness be piqued and their belief in the legitimacy of alternative narratives, practices, and theologies be awoken.

In this section, I will relate the experiences of single mothers who participated in interviews for this project, noting the theologies, messages, and practices that they have either created themselves or been impacted by that they have found to be supportive and empowering. Additionally, I will explore resources for the construction of counternarratives and “alternative realities” that offer a challenge to the monolith that is the metanarrative of the propriety of the patriarchal, two-parent family structure and the exclusionary privilege it enjoys in the increasingly globalized neoliberal class and economic system. I contend that one of the greatest travesties to single mothers is the role that privatization – a neoliberal value – plays in “nuclearizing” the family and religion, but I believe there also exist within evangelical Christianity resources to combat this very process and value. I believe two aspects of the experiences of single mothers in both the domestic fieldwork that contributed to this project and in other research on female heads of household carry the strong potential to create an articulated countertheology from the margins and give rise to an alternative reality that destabilizes the hegemony of patriarchal, economically-determined power. The first is the celebration of the

single mother as “Christ-like”, and the second is the reclaiming of the community, as opposed to the nuclear family, as the “building block of society”.

1. Single Mothers as Christ-Like

In the first case – the creation of theologies that articulate the special likeness between female heads of household and the Divine, the focus remains on constructing a theology of liberation from feelings of shame, inadequacy, and incompleteness that plagues Christian single mothers. Additionally, such a theology provides an impetus for resistance to and for the transforming of unjust structures and oppressive ideologies. One of the primary hurdles to likening single mothers to Christ is the issue of premarital sex and how it is viewed as a sin. Many of the female heads of household who participated in the study are constructing their own theologies that counter this notion. For example, Jessica challenges messages about the sinfulness of out-of-wedlock pregnancy by saying, “What did I do that was wrong? There were alternatives to having my child. It is not for lack of morality that we became single moms.” She also questions the Christian ideal of marriage that is often presented as the only “fix” and option for single mothers, stating that “the male is so often presented as this knight in shining armor, but the armor is rusted.”

Likewise, Erin muses that she never felt as though she had committed “some big sin” by getting pregnant but instead believes that her pregnancy was “part of God’s plan because [she doesn’t] know where [she] would be without [her] son.” Because her son has always been part of a loving family, regardless of whether that family had a father in it, she does not feel that the nuclear family is necessarily the only way that God structures human life and healthful relationships. When asked what she desires for single mothers, she replied that she would like to take away any shame and self-doubt they feel due to their awareness that everyone in church

knows that they had sex. Erin asserts an interesting theology of sex in which she says that she believes that her intimacy with an abusive boyfriend – not the father of her child, though – was wrong because she knew even at the time that they were not going to be together forever. According to her theology, there is something holy about giving oneself to another in a sexual relationship when it is accompanied by a commitment – or the belief that there is a commitment – to remain together through life. She recognizes that this does not always come to fruition – that couples who believe they will remain together do break up, but she believes the test of whether or not sex is sinful lies in the intention or feeling that the couple has for each other.

Lucy, too, a Latina mother of three and devoted member of a large charismatic evangelical church, believes that not everyone is meant to be married, and some people are only meant to be married for a season. She contends that the emphasis placed on marriage, especially for women, leads many single females to engage in harmful relationships since they feel the pressure to force a marriage into being. She says that sex outside of marriage should be based on love, and that we have a natural yearning for intimacy that leads many of us to engage in premarital sex. This, she says, is often done out of love, and God wants us to love one another – but there must be a mutual commitment to this between the partners. “We need a better understanding of love versus lust, of ethics, theology, marriage, and sex,” Lucy says, “and as single moms, we have a better understanding of this.” In other words, as those positioned on the “outside” of traditional theologies of sex, single mothers may be better equipped to construct a more accurate, Christ-inspired, and experience-based theology of sex, sin, and love than those

who have found themselves inside the bounds of conventionality and are the main ones replicating shaming messages regarding the sinfulness of sex outside of marriage.

Jenn, too, offered a theology of sexuality that challenges the predominant abstinence-before-marriage messages proffered by many evangelical circles. Like the other interview participants, she desires to change the shame and stigma surrounding single motherhood and believes that they need more supportive messages and better support systems. According to her theology, sex is an important decision with important emotional consequences because the two parties should both be committed to “doing no harm” to one another. In other words, sex should not be something one engages in for self-esteem purposes, as an emotional release, to please their partner, or to experiment in the moment. Any motivation behind sex that “uses” the partner or allows oneself to be used for another’s gain is unhealthy. Therefore, Jenn believes that the partners should love each other “in a Christ-like sense rather than just being ‘in love’”. By this, she means that each partner should be committed to mutual, self-giving love and care in the relationship. These, she believes, ought to be the guidelines that determine when sex is sinful or not. She also believes that when one partner makes these commitments to the other, expecting but not receiving mutuality in these commitments, that partner is not sinning.

Additionally, Rose agrees that a woman should decide what she should do with her body. Having decided that prayerfully, she can rely on God for the strength to maintain that commitment healthfully and for peace in her decision. This decision should be guided by love for oneself, for God, and for one’s neighbor – and by common sense.

Significantly, the strikingly similar theologies that these women are formulating actually tighten the boundaries around “healthy sex” by removing the traditional restrictions that are based on timing (in marriage) and form (between a man and a woman) and instead redefine them

based on quality, mutuality, maturity, and other-care in the relationship. This means that marital relations may actually be seen as unhealthy in this theology. The institutionalization of marriage points towards a sort of ironic relationship – perhaps even a hypocritical one – between church and state. Eager to differentiate itself from the state and antithesizing government as the mundane, even evil, “world” in opposition to the Church’s divinity, evangelicalism nonetheless coerces and utilizes the state to endorse and monitor its ideals. Marriage is one of these areas of happy melding of evangelical church and state, reifying the “good” as the adherence to a particular form.

This same litmus test for righteousness appears in evangelical ethics and moralities time and again: what is “good” is the perfect performance of a law, the strict adherence to rules. What is meaningfully absent is any contextualization of “goodness” or critical reflection on actively responding to changing contexts and diverse situations by “doing” what is good or best in that particular instance. Instead, in certain popular forms of evangelical morality and theology, goodness is not allowed to respond to situations or changes, to people and lives. Goodness is reified. With the institutionalization and monitoring of sex and marriage, the label of goodness is applied to adherence to laws and forms rather than to actual qualities and relationships. This thus plasters over the persistent gender-based violence of inequality, abuse, and coercion within the nuclear family and removes the necessity to thoughtfully consider how to uphold and do what is good for each party in the shifting scenarios of daily life and the unique character of each person.

In addition to removing the critical consideration necessary to contextualize goodness in response to personal and situational uniqueness and dynamism, the privilege granted to heterosexual marriage focuses on form over quality and relies upon the state to grant legitimacy to relationships rather than the ethical quality of relationships to grant them legitimacy. In Jesus’

gloss on the Jewish Law in Matthew 5-6, he maintains that following the Law entails abiding by the spirit of loving one's neighbor that inspires the Law rather than abiding by the form of the Law. (See also Matthew 22:34-37.)³⁵⁶ Thus, in this text, our attention is turned towards the content and quality of relationships – how “good” our attempts at being and performing the good really are – over the form they take, allowing us to deconstruct the privilege granted to marital relationships and, in so doing, also deconstruct a major platform on which the inequality and judgment of female-headed households is built. If engagement in sex before marriage is reevaluated through a different theological lens that prioritizes the quality of the mutuality, love, and commitment between the partners in the relationship, this may overcome one of the main hurdles to the valorization rather than vilification of single mothers. Creating a theology that not only reevaluates sexual ethics, thus removing any legitimization of shame or the struggles attendant to single motherhood, but also celebrates single mothers as Christlike or exhibiting values and virtues of the Christian faith appears to also be an empowering tool for the interview participants.

Just as venerating the virginity of Mary made sexual abstinence the paragon of virtue and depicting God as male legitimized patriarchy and androcentrism, so too will offering a favorable comparison between unmarried mothers and Christ elevate female heads of household from objects of pity or reprehension to leaders and examples of virtue to be emulated. One powerful move in theology that contributes to the celebration of single mothers is the recovery and elevation of the female metaphors for God, as well as the maternal ones that indicate God as Mother. In this vein, Cristina Grenholm has developed a robust theology of motherhood, tying the role of mother to what she believes is both the economy and essence of the Divine and the

³⁵⁶ Matt., in The CEB Women's Bible, (Nashville, TN: Common English Bible, 2016).

highest role and purpose of humans – that is, the capacity for and action of creating. The creative process in our world is the ongoing presence and action of God, writes Grenholm, and, similarly, the mother accommodates and contributes to the ongoing creation of human life. Motherhood as an act of co-creation with the Divine, unfortunately, has been overshadowed by other forms of labor, but being made in God’s likeness, proposes Grenholm, refers to the process of becoming human by living in and creating communion with others. Grenholm asserts that creation is a relational act by which the creator’s identity is formed by their relationship with and to the creation and in the process of creating.³⁵⁷ A mother is a mother only in relation to her child and in the process of creating the child and raising them. This both reflects the relationality of the Trinity as argued by orthodox Christian doctrine and threatens patriarchy and male privilege because the woman is made mother – an identity and role that, according to the theology presented in this project, reflects Divine action and example – in relation to her child rather than in relation to a male partner or spouse. What is important to note in this theology is that, unlike capitalism, motherhood does not create a “product” that the mother can control; instead, the relationship between mother and child defies and resists control because the creator/mother has created and is creating not just a creation but a co-creator. Therefore, motherhood produces communion and community of equals rather than hierarchy, which reflects the relationships proposed as divine and salvific here in this project.

Additionally, Grenholm takes the position that the vulnerability of the mother, and, I will add, especially the unmarried mother creates a connection between the mother and Christ. By suffering for the sake of another, the mother embodies what Grenholm considers “the fundamental message of Christianity: that love, humility, and respect for others” ought to and

³⁵⁷ Cristina Grenholm, *Motherhood and Love: Beyond the Gendered Stereotypes of Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 31-32.

will “replace wealth, power and privilege, and that God the crucified replaces the highest power.”³⁵⁸ However, Grenholm recognizes the danger of romanticizing vulnerability, though much more ought to be said to develop a nuanced and robust theology of vulnerability. Rightfully so, Grenholm states that vulnerability is a prerequisite for good relationships, for creativity, and for love but also that self-sacrifice has been leveraged as a “feminine virtue” for the justification of the straits and suffering impressed upon women and on single mothers in particular.

However, Kwok Pui-lan offers an important critique or caution to this kind of argumentation. According to Kwok, Empire-influenced Christianity glorifies Jesus’ sacrifice and suffering and promises salvation and triumph in another world. These theologies urge women to model themselves on Christ’s sacrifice and obedience, thus enduring pain and allowing master systems to continue to oppress the vulnerable.³⁵⁹ Grenholm anticipates such a critique, differentiating between a Christ-like vulnerability in keeping with the Divine will and what she terms “exposure,” which she defines as “exploited vulnerability.” As Grenholm posits, exploited vulnerability, like the continued judgment and shaming of single mothers and the rampant economic and social difficulties female heads of household are tasked with navigating, is the result of oppression. On the other hand, vulnerability “opens up the possibility of love” and serves as a “defense against oppression,” as well as a preventative against vulnerability slipping into exposure.³⁶⁰ This is because vulnerability, as that which Christ demonstrated and as that which the idealized vision of a single mother embodies, is undertaken as a position and action of

³⁵⁸ Cristina Grenholm, *Motherhood and Love: Beyond the Gendered Stereotypes of Theology*, 102.

³⁵⁹ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 156.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 120-121.

self-giving love seeking mutuality and reciprocity in a relationship in which trust in the recipient's potential return of this love is a realistic hope. The mutual, reciprocal ideal of vulnerability is what makes this position protected even as it is risky. However, when love and vulnerability are not cherished, protected, and returned by the recipient but are rather leveraged by that party as an advantage over the vulnerable, vulnerability becomes exposure and exploitation. Grenholm's theory of love, vulnerability, and exposure ties the self-giving of single motherhood to the example of Christ in a way that celebrates this similarity but also avoids idealizing suffering and sacrifice, instead explaining the cause of female-headed households' oppression to be exposure and exploitation rather than the vulnerability of the selfless single mother who parents without a marital partner.

Additionally, single mothers may find empowerment in the idea of a God that takes their side as the marginalized in the world. While this may tend towards replicating notions of condescension to the "sinner" and the "least", John D. Caputo argues that single mothers may instead interpret this as the Divine choosing to embody, fight with, and choose as those worth emulating the ones that society often vilifies:

Jesus systematically took the side of the outsider, of those who are excluded and marginalized and made to suffer for their marginalization by the powers that be, those whose names are blackened by their difference from the mainstream.³⁶¹

The very "otherness" of single mothers aligns them with the outsider-ness of Christ. As Charles W. Amjad-Ali and Lester Edwin J. Ruiz state, "The evangelical confession of Jesus is useless without understanding that Jesus was rejected and crucified not by ordinary humanity but by

³⁶¹ John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 109.

those in power.”³⁶² Additionally, in Hosea 2:21, God is said to have compassion on the “not loved.” Interestingly, the word for compassion here in the Hebrew is related to the word womb, which conjures up images of a God who loves the world as a fierce mother who birthed the world. Thus, instead of God simply being moved to compassion by the hurting, God is organically intertwined with the suffering as a fellow-sufferer and mother of the suffering. In such a way, there is potential for the creation of a theology of God as (Single) Mother. Ana Maria Tepedino writes regarding new, gendered images of the Divine, claiming that God is frequently imaged in the sacred texts of Christianity as engendering, giving birth, and nurturing, then fighting for the life of that which God births. Tepedino argues that the interconnectedness between God and this world as a mother to its child, the yearning for nurturing and giving life to God’s birthed creation, and the struggle that this entails is inextricably bound to justice.³⁶³ Although Tepedino does not directly connect this to single motherhood, the parallel she makes between God and motherhood is relevant to single mothers, but the argument for striving for life and justice as the essential task of a mother and of God offers a strong correlation between the struggles of single mothers and the work of God.

In anecdotal evidence, this celebration of single mothers as Christlike and worthy of admiration is taking place to some extent in faith communities, at least in certain individual cases.. For example, Kyle believes that since she became a single mother, she is “the vessel God has always wanted [her] to be” because “God protected [her] by removing [her]” from an unhealthy relationship, and “now [she] knows what it means to be a follower, not just a

³⁶² Charles W. Amjad-Ali and Lester Edwin J. Ruiz, “Betrayed by a Kiss: Evangelicals and U.S. Empire,” *Evangelicals and Empire: Christian Alternatives to the Political Status Quo*, eds. Bruce Ellis Benson and Peter Goodwin Heltzel, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 62.

³⁶³ Ana Maria Tepedino, “Gender and New (Re-newed) Images of the Divine,” *Global Voices for Gender Justice*, 93.

believer.” In Lucy’s church, her pastor says that the bigger financial givers in the church are single mothers, who also give of their time and energy as volunteers because “single mothers have surrendered to God.” Founder of an Oklahoma single-parent ministry Pam Kanaly echoes this, saying, that “when the single mother is ‘whole and healed, she is the strongest member in the church. She is the best worker, a leader, an icon in the church.’”³⁶⁴

In Jenn’s case, she felt empowered by the messages she received from individual Christians rather than from the church itself. She says that the most liberating, empowering words came from her mother’s friend, who told her, “God trusted you enough to have this baby.” When she heard these words, Jenn thought, “This is how I want to view God and how I want my son to view God” – that is, as a loving, divine being who elects to put trust and power into women to raise their children well without a marital partner. Jessica, too, has experienced empowerment from the words of individual Christians, recalling that people have told her, “I don’t know how you are doing what you are doing,” referring to her raising her daughter well and balancing work and school while maintaining her devout activity in her church. This makes her feel like a leader, as though people look up to her. Like Jenn, she believes that it is because of God’s love that single mothers have their children.

Many of the women also found empowerment through seeing leaders who “looked like them” – that is, who were either single mothers themselves or in whom they could see reflections of their own experiences or struggles. Lucy says that at her church, the pastors speak honestly about their own struggles and sins and, in addition, they tell the unwed mothers in their congregation not to give up on their dreams and provide opportunities for these women to be

³⁶⁴ Molly Worthen, “Single Mothers with Family Values.”

leaders. Lucy herself serves in the Guest, New Members, and Children's Ministries in her church.

Erin related two interesting experiences she had in two different congregations in which she held membership. When she lived in another state, her church's pastor preached frequently about how he had gone through a divorce and been kicked out of his former church. Erin felt as though this made him a real human being – relatable and unafraid to show his scars. Her current church hired a youth minister who was a young single mother, and she felt as though this act of welcoming a single mother to leadership and employment in a church pastoral role was empowering to her. Similarly, Jessica speaks of how surprised and empowered she felt when the pastors and other leaders at her church shared their own personal stories, which were actually stories akin to her own. In particular, her pastor's wife had experienced comparable situations to Jessica's, which she found comforting. As she says, "The people in leadership look like me!" Because of this, she too believes she would be welcome in a leadership position in her congregation. Furthermore, she believes that the misinterpretation of the Bible in other churches leads to harmful treatment of single mothers. Yet, even with these numerous positive experiences in their own congregations, the participants in the interviews all recognized that the stigmatization of single mothers is a powerful force in the Christian church and the world at large, and all of them felt as though their positive experiences represented a unique perspective or congregation that most unmarried parents do not have the privilege of encountering.

Although leadership is a primary value in neoliberalism and in evangelical communities whose theologies of authority as a divine gift and of submissive obedience as a divine obligation of those not in leadership, the leadership described in these interviews seems to differ from neoliberal and authoritarian models of leadership. In empire, those in power are supposed to be

accepted as good without question by their subjects. This has less to do with the actual personal attributes of the powerful and more to do with a theology of determinism that says that God, who is in control of all people and circumstances, determines that whatever occurs will be for good – including the ascension of persons to power and the decisions they make while in power. Even if these decisions and actions appear to be evil, because this theology holds that God is in control and can do no evil, the argumentation runs that such appearances are due to a divine concept of good and evil that transcends human logic and comprehension. What *is* cited as evil, under this theology, is lack of submission to the rules or authority figures that God has chosen. In this ideology, authority figures themselves lie beyond good and evil, in a sense. Thus, they are given permission to construe their power as hierarchical and to use it to dominate, for these concepts of power are attributed to the Divine as well.

However, the images of leadership attested to by the interview participants are people who the participants respect for their transparency about their own struggles, their willingness to appoint to visible leadership those who are often marginalized, and their celebration of the quality of one's love as the qualification for leadership rather than the proximity of one's performance to a certain ideal or norm. Although the interview participants did not detail exactly what power each leader possessed, how equitably this power was shared, or whether or not authoritarian leadership and obedience to such leaders was retained as a value, the visibility of non-traditional and underrepresented identities in leadership and messaging about the depth and radicality of one's love and self-giving empowered interview participants to see themselves as holy and justified candidates for religious and other forms of leadership. However, what seems to have stayed intact was the idealizing of self-sacrifice, as well as a concept of God as deterministic, "choosing" people to endure or experience certain events, often based on their

capacity to suffer with stoicism and strength. Thus, the messaging and leadership models that were cited by interview participants as empowering hold some ambivalence that certainly can be utilized by the marginalized to equip and energize their assertion of agency, leadership, and counternarratives at the same time that it can be exploited by the power center to keep unmarried mothers outside of power.

Finally, another way that counternarratives are imaging single mothers as “Christ-like” and thus worthy of dignity and respect is by arguing that the quality of the relationship between mother and child, and, perhaps more importantly, the communal relationships single mothers often create in order to survive reflect an integral feature of the Trinity, as well as the foundational ethics of Christianity. While the next chapter will deal more fully with the work of South African theologians, activists, and single mothers to create counternarratives that empower female heads of household and challenge the hegemony of patriarchy, it is relevant here to mention the theories of prominent African theologians that are in fact already receiving an American audience. Advocating for a new conception of single motherhood, performed in love, as emulating the Divine, Mpyana Fulgence Nyengele relates single mothers to the Trinity through the concept of perichoresis. The “relations of mutuality and reciprocity within the Triune God,” perichoresis, argues Nyengele, is the moral standard for humanity, the essential teaching of Christianity, and, in fact, the essence of God. Nyengele characterizes the communality demonstrated by groups of single-parent families that commit to living in proximity to and resourcing one another as images of perichoresis and lauds the commitment of female heads of household who give of themselves for the well-being of their children.³⁶⁵ The centering of

³⁶⁵ Mpyana Fulgence Nyengele, *African Women's Theology, Gender Relations, and Family Systems Theory*, (New York: Peter Lang, Inc., 2004), 66.

perichoresis in both Christian ethics and theologies of the Divine contributes both to the celebration rather than vilification of single mothers as Christ-like in their ethics and to the deconstruction of the idealization of the nuclear family in favor of an emphasis on community and the equal sharing of all partners in power and value. This centering of perichoresis in Christian theology demands a remonstrance to the widespread inequality of female-headed households. After all, as Mercy Amba Oduyoye writes, the perichoresis of the Trinity is the human call to “just relations,” or “relationships in which all participants have equal value, share, and power to alter aspects of relationships that do not liberate.”³⁶⁶ Echoing this sentiment, Mario Costa, Catherine Keller, and Anna Mercedes write that Jesus’ preaching of radical love that draws disparate persons into vulnerable, mutually self-giving relationships makes moral codes and morality itself *relative*, in that it becomes “subject to the neighborly interdependence of all creatures.”³⁶⁷ That is, whatever pulls one into a community or ethics characterized by self-giving love seeking mutuality is worthy of celebration and is, in fact, “the good.” This next section will explore more fully the power that recentring community could have for single mothers and the criticality of this concept in many forms of Christianity.

2. Recentring Community

While redefining sin as it relates to sexuality, celebrating single mothers as paragons of Jesus’ character and teachings, and promoting churches, ministries, and theologies that justify and support single parents are experienced as empowering to the participants in my fieldwork,

³⁶⁶ Quoted in Mpyana Fulgence Nyengele, *African Women’s Theology, Gender Relations, and Family Systems Theory*, 67.

³⁶⁷ Mario Costa, Catherine Keller, and Anna Mercedes, “Love in Times of Empire: Theopolitics Today,” *Evangelicals and Empire: Christian Alternatives to the Political Status Quo*, eds. Bruce Ellis Benson and Peter Goodwin Heltzel, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 296.

there remains a need for practical changes that promote the material and ideological deconstruction of the primacy given to privatization and to nuclear families. Community-based identities are a central feature of early Christian teaching, as seen in passages like Acts 2, which refers to followers of Jesus Christ operating according to communal ownership of property, wealth, and resources rather than private ownership, or in I Corinthians 12, which urges readers to recognize their interconnectedness with and responsibility for others. In fact, the Christian Scriptures arguably diminish the importance of families of origin and nuclear families. As Margaret Mead once said, regarding the history of human culture and our current idealization of the privatized nuclear family, “Nobody has ever before asked the nuclear family to live all by itself in a box the way we do. With no relatives, no support, we’ve put it in an impossible situation.”³⁶⁸ If the single mother suffers alone, perhaps it is only because of the failure of the human community to be what it ought to be – and, in terms of the Christian community, to be what it was conceived to be in its original construction.

As this project has sought to argue, the suffering of single mothers has its basis in patriarchy, classism, and racism – essentially in an unequal distribution of power, supported by metanarratives that vilify premarital pregnancy and divinize the middle-class nuclear family structure. These power dynamics and the systems that support them isolate individuals and families and attempt to obscure the interconnectedness of individuals, oppressions, and those who hold power and the way they conceive of and apply that power in our dominant political, economic, and civil-society systems. Many popular Christian theologies have perpetuated these metanarratives instead of finding within the religion’s own sacred text counternarratives that promote interconnectedness, shared power, and communal-based social structures and identities

³⁶⁸ Qtd. in Robert Andrews, *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations*, (NY: Columbia University Press, 1993), 315.

rather than privatized or atomized ones. In fact, within the Christian Scriptures are apparently dissonant voices that may challenge neoliberalism itself. There lies within Christianity an ambivalence in that it oftentimes supports empire and is an agent of harm and oppression but also holds within itself the resources for the deconstruction of empire and the construction of alternative realities. The communities, fictive kin, and extended families that single mothers form for support and survival may be prime and powerful examples of the thriving that can occur through embracing communal-based social structures and identities and undermining privatization that marginalizes many.

In addition to providing a potential embodied counternarrative with demonstrable success that can challenge the hegemony of privatization and the nuclear family structure, the communities that single mothers form and join are also vital to the formation of possible social movements for the rights of single mothers. In M. Bahati Kuumba's "'You've Struck a Rock': Comparing Gender, Social Movements, and Transformation in the United States and South Africa," Kuumba writes that informal networks and kinship relationships are key to women's involvement in social movements, such as the civil rights and the anti-apartheid movements.³⁶⁹ Feminist activist and speaker Shelby Knox says that there is power in the gathering of women who share their stories with one another. She defines feminism as "hearing your pain and struggle in someone else's story or voice and realizing there is nothing wrong with them or with you but rather with a world that makes us think that there is."³⁷⁰ This acts as a conduit and catalyst for the formation of a collective identity and for solidarity, and it also allows space for the naming of specific problems and patterns in systems and worlds that have caused pain and

³⁶⁹ M. Bahati Kuumba, "'You've Struck a Rock': Comparing Gender, Social Movements, and Transformation in the United States and South Africa," in *Gender and Society*, Vol. 16, No. 4, (Aug., 2002): 515.

³⁷⁰ Shelby Knox, "An Evening with Shelby Knox" (lecture, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, October 29, 2013).

suffering to numerous similarly situated persons. In other words, spaces for the sharing of personal stories counter the privatization of experiences and politicize seemingly personal or private issues and struggles.

While only two of the interview participants view their involvement with single-parent groups as political acts, all of the women articulated their appreciation or need for community-based social structures rather than biological or nuclear-family ones. Many actively participate in single-parent groups that practice the sharing of stories and resources and develop counternarratives to dominant theologies about sexual purity, family, or female submissiveness to male authority. Of the ten interview participants, one of them, Skylar, is an activist for women experiencing unplanned pregnancy and has written a book about her own experiences as a pregnant college student and Christian, and Rose is a counselor and pastor, working specifically with domestic violence survivors. Kyle and Tricia are leaders of single-parent ministries at their respective churches, and Jessica and Lucy are active in their churches' single-parent ministries.

When asked what the most helpful messages from their churches or from Christians were, six respondents mentioned the solidarity and care they felt from either their single-parent ministries or a Bible study. One respondent, active in her church's single-parent ministry, mentioned that there should be a group just for female heads of household, saying that she would find that to be empowering. She feels that her experience as a never-married mother differs significantly – and is received differently – from that of divorced mothers. A second respondent believed that support groups for single mothers in the church would be helpful and would create a community in which single mothers could help one another and gain a sense of divine favor and empowerment from doing so. A third interview participant voiced that she herself felt she needed a support group but did not know where to find one. A fourth woman said that more

churches should have ministries for single mothers, which she felt would promote the welfare of children of single parents. A fifth respondent spoke about the importance of single-parent groups as a space to share and admit struggles to trusted friends and receive encouragement from them, knowing they have dealt with similar issues. Although these groups are not necessarily mobilizing for political causes, their existence as support groups for single mothers provides a sort of incipient counternarrative to the privatization of the family and the isolation of single mothers.³⁷¹

When the interview participants were asked what desired changes they would make for single mothers or for churches' treatment of single mothers, eight either included or emphasized material and practical support, while all ten mentioned spiritual support and the eradication of shaming narratives or labeling. In terms of material and practical support, five out of the ten women said that they wished for better policies for single mothers that would address and alleviate the economic struggles they face, and they desired for the church to advocate for these policies. One woman specifically mentioned that she wished churches would encourage women to keep joint control with male partners over everything, including decision-making, so that women and men conceive of relationships as partnerships. Additionally, she would like to see churches providing job-search help and job creation so that every single mother could have a job that supplies a living wage. Her focus appeared to be on encouraging the sharing of power between sexes so that women are not left destitute or without confidence in their abilities to succeed and provide for their children. A second participant spoke of her frustration with the welfare system because she was unable to get food stamps when her full-time job did not pay

³⁷¹ The term "incipient theology" hails from James R. Cochrane's work, including his text, *Circles of Dignity: Community Wisdom and Theological Reflection*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), in which he engages in research with a Base Ecclesial Community of "ordinary believers" engaged in Bible study together in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

enough to cover her bills and needs, since she only had one child and her salary was technically above the poverty line. She believed that her church would be an advocate for policies such as working welfare for single mothers, even though her congregation was not at the time actively involved in any form of policy advocacy or campaigns for single mothers. A third single mother asserted that the state should supplement incomes for single mothers, who, as women, are paid less than men for the same jobs. Yet a fourth interviewee related how she saw the top three struggles of single mothers – the lack of familial support, finances, and childcare – contributing to rising unemployment amongst female heads of household. However, out of the ten participants, only two interviewees were able to share stories of how their churches provided for their material needs. None of the participants recalled having experiences of their own congregations advocating for social justice and action that would benefit single mothers or calling attention to gender inequality, patriarchy, and injustice that victimizes single mothers, though many believed that these messages were implicit in their churches' missions.

The interview participants' responses reveal a need for a different kind of support for single mothers – that is, support that is not built on a morality code that idealizes and idolizes the nuclear family and premarital abstinence and is therefore not requisite upon single mothers' repentance and support that is practical and material, with social, political, and economic implications. Moreover, their responses reveal ingredients already present that can be utilized to not merely support single mothers but introduce new constructs, narratives, and systems that empower single mothers at the same time that they challenge and dismantle the hegemonic and oftentimes insidious hold of the power of class and patriarchy that neoliberalism's happy relationship with Christianity produces. The respondents in the interview did not necessarily always have ready in their responses suggestions for new systems that they openly articulated as

oppositional to neoliberalism, patriarchy, and other oppressions and injustices named here in this project. Although they may not have proffered recommendations that would draw their churches into the fray of the battle for deconstructing oppressions that victimize single mothers, these women, working within the options and schemas available to them, actually voiced creative, brave, and potent ideas for stronger church involvement in progressive social movements for women's rights, as well as grounds for single mothers to build counternarratives that could deconstruct shame-based narratives and call into question practices and systems accepted by the wider public as axiomatic. For example, the women do not feel it appropriate for the Christian Church to maintain a "separation" from politics when it comes to advocating for better wages for women, paid leave, subsidized childcare, and other policy initiatives that would benefit single mothers. However, many of the women see their own churches as embodying the spirit of support for single mothers, though they may not be "politically active" in that they have at times been recipients of gifts of charity and are often active in ministries created just for single parents like them and that provide them supportive spaces and life-skills advice. The relationships they have formed in these spaces have functioned frequently as "networking" opportunities that have been useful to them as they navigated a patriarchal world stacked against single mothers.

But these are informal, unofficial forms of support, though they are potent tools for building a different kind of faith community. Instead of "siloeing" single parents in their own ministries as a special-interest program, churches ought to centralize the plight of these members of their community as a justice issue into which they are drawn and in which they are complicit if they continue to replicate behaviors, beliefs, and practices and support ways of being and systems that marginalize and shame single mothers. As M. Shawn Copeland asserts, it is "not difference, but indifference, ignorance, egoism, and selfishness [that] are obstacles to

solidarity,”³⁷² and this is certainly true when it comes to the evangelical Christian church. Aside from policy advocacy, churches could take an active stand to embody a different ethics and economics by subsidizing childcare for single mothers when they have school programs attached to their congregations, intentionally appoint single mothers to positions of leadership and decision-making councils, create scholarships for unmarried mothers to attend college and seminary, and hire single mothers for staff. What is taking place informally amongst single mothers and single-parent ministries, also, is a sort of cooperative community group that shares resources and socializes duties and benefits. If Christian churches took it upon themselves to follow this model and create fair-trade coops for their surrounding communities, as well as for their congregations, this would not only draw single mothers into the wider life of the community instead of isolating them but would deconstruct the identity-based hierarchy of peoples and their access to thriving.

What the participants in this fieldwork demonstrate is what is referred to in the next chapter as “embodied theology” and “incipient theology.”³⁷³ In reference to the former, these women are oftentimes embodying a theology and alternative ethics and economy that they may not have yet processed and formulated into a formal systematic theology and theory. Yet they are enacting a counternarrative, living it out without necessarily realizing how transgressive, progressive, and potent it could be. As Isabel Apawo Phiri, Dearakshanam Betty Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar state, such women are “imbued with a need for justice and dignity” and “guided by a liberation ethic consciousness,” though they may not have “acted according to some explicit

³⁷² M. Shawn Copeland, “Toward a Critical Christian Feminist Theology of Solidarity,” *Women and Theology*, eds. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Phyllis H. Kaminski (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 24.

³⁷³ See footnote 178.

ideological model, such as feminism.”³⁷⁴ But, as a 2015 study of American families revealed, whether or not people identify as feminists, structural changes in relationships of family and work are producing new forms of gender and relationships and new beliefs about these relationships, and all of these beliefs and relationships are still in process and are only provisionally and partially articulated.³⁷⁵

Secondly, as an “incipient theology”, this theology and practice that the women display and articulate is oftentimes just in the beginning stages of being produced. These are new ideas, perhaps created by their own experiences rather than through intellectual discussion or scholarship, and, oftentimes, the women creating these new theologies are working within – or bucking against – systems that disallow their questions and challenges to these systems’ authority. The questions proposed to them in the interviews were, for several of the women, the first times that they had been asked such questions, and, at times, their responses were self-conflicting because they were trying to synchronize and synthesize teachings that had shaped their schemas with experiences and ideas, often of their own, that were newer and seemed to contradict accepted ideas. Also, because there is little publicly accessible “theology and politics

³⁷⁴ Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar, “Introduction,” *Her-stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, eds. Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar, (Pietermaritzburg, Cluster Publications, 2002): 1.

³⁷⁵ Niki Graf, “Most Americans say children are better off with a parent at home.”

for single mothers”, the women participating in this study were essentially creating an intentionally single-mother-centered, postcolonial liberation theology as grassroots theologians.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it appears that there are resources for counternarratives that benefit single mothers within evangelical Christian congregations that are often amongst the strongest champions of purity narratives, conservative economic, political, and social practices and policies, and metanarratives concerning the divine ordination of the middle-class, male-headed nuclear family. Many of the American single mothers are creating their own counternarratives by rethinking theologies of sex and formulating single-parent ministries that contribute to their sense of good standing in their faith, as well as to their emotional, spiritual, and mental resources to cope with the struggles of single parenthood. Furthermore, these communities that single mothers are forming on micro levels within their congregations or in parachurch groups, or their desire for such communities, present a sort of embodied alternative to the evangelical and American privileging of the male-headed nuclear family as the building block of society and primary conduit of Christian training. Additionally, although they represent congregations that display a range of attitudes towards single motherhood, these women are finding dissonant voices in their reading of the Bible, their own thoughts about morality and God, and the words and actions of others that challenge conventional notions of sin, of healthy families, of kinship, and of their role as women in relation to men.

What their stories and experiences reveal, though, is that there may not be a sense amongst single mothers in America that the Christian messages and actions that have hurt their feelings or shamed them may also be fundamental in the perpetuation of the struggles that they

face materially. In other words, there seems to be an uncertainty as to whether or not it is appropriate to view their struggles and their theology as political, as though the latter is a separate realm. Moreover, though some of the interview participants appeared to believe this, collective recognition that the struggles and shame single mothers face are systemic and patterned does not seem to exist. This reluctance to look beyond oneself for the cause of one's suffering is consistent with both dominant Christian metanarratives that emphasize personal responsibility, as well as with dominant neoliberal economics that claim that the individual is solely responsible for their own success or failure. However, it also undermines single mothers' ability to form a collective identity and to view their abilities to thrive as female heads of household and members of communal-based networks as hints of the need for a transformation of the social order and its values. Finally, because they remain atomized, even in their single-parent ministries, single mothers may struggle to connect in wider networks and recognize that their personal struggles – and, powerfully, their personal theologies – are political, just as the theologies and struggles that have victimized them are political.

Postcolonial feminism is engaging in brave, rigorous work to deconstruct hegemonic ideologies and structures that prop up the oppressions caused by globalized neoliberalism and its patriarchal, racist, heterosexist class system, including those perpetuated by certain forms, teachings, and practices of Christianity. However, while some progressive evangelicals are engaging in this work – namely, Jim Wallis, Musa Dube, Kwame Bediako, Catherine Keller, and the like – much of the critical deconstruction is being launched by those outside the evangelical tradition. This can certainly be effective, especially to decentralize and neutralize the power of evangelical patriarchy and its propagation of class, but two related pieces are missing from this approach. First of all, construction of a counternarratives that exploit the ambivalence of

evangelicalism and offer liberating alternatives for those who identify as evangelical cannot be created outside of evangelicalism *for* evangelicalism. Instead, evangelicals need to be doing this work themselves. The answer is not simply to abandon evangelicalism wholesale. Beyond the questionable plausibility of such a notion, this goal would be problematic because much of the world's Christians hold to evangelical models of Christianity, and to rule evangelicalism as irredeemably harmful and evil is not a proclamation that can come from Western voices without repeating the arrogant damage of cultural genocide, outlawing non-Western, non-white expressions of faith. Additionally, I believe that to write off evangelicalism as a monolithically evil or harmful system of beliefs and practices is to miss out on an important and potent – albeit ambivalent – tool for change and liberation.

Secondly, and related to this, the creation of counternarratives of evangelicalism have ignored a key piece of the neoliberal machine – the nuclear family as the ideal and main consumer unit. While progressive evangelicalism does take into account gender and sexuality, these inquiries usually fall along the lines of men's and women's equality, gay and transgender rights, and, recently, sexual ethics and liberation. These are important challenges, but there is a dearth of work being done to recognize and deconstruct the alliance of neoliberal privileging of male-headed nuclear families and evangelical messaging around premarital sex; even as progressive evangelicalism challenges the abstinence-only creeds of Christianity, it is noticeably silent when it comes to premarital pregnancy and single motherhood. If it is important that evangelicals do the work of creating counternarratives to mobilize the hybridity of evangelical Christianity and to engage in a powerful postcolonial theology, then it is essential that single mothers be engaged, equipped, and empowered to the work of creating a postcolonial *feminist* theology that presents both ideological and practical counternarratives that decentralize the

power of patriarchal evangelicalism and neoliberalism. This is the task Kwok Pui-lan urges as essential when she writes that postcolonial feminist theology “needs to analyze the use of theological symbols for the colonization of women’s minds and bodies and the reappropriation of these symbols for resistance, subversion, and empowerment.”³⁷⁶ Additionally, Kwok asserts that the work of deconstruction is appropriately and vitally the right and opportunity of the marginalized, as “deconstructing [...] constructs [created by the power center] of Christ as hybrids – constructs rather than transported Christian essence – allows the subaltern to claim authority to advance their own Christology.”³⁷⁷

The research and fieldwork on American Christian single mothers has yielded promising examples of counternarratives that deconstruct messages that shame single mothers and that diverge from neoliberal constructs that idealize the nuclear family unit – for instance, the forms of socializing of resources and care seen at times among single mothers, marginalized communities, and even in single-parent ministries. However, there seems to be a pervading respect for the authority of a form of American evangelicalism that takes itself to be paradigmatic for all Christianity and for evangelicalism in particular. While this paradigm’s attendant messages concerning the nuclear family and male headship may have less traction amongst single mothers featured in this project, the economic and social structures that drive the marginalization and struggles of single mothers appear to be taken either as axiomatic, as divinely ordained, or as impossible to overturn, even as these women long for and embody different ways of living and being. The efforts that these women are making, and their brilliant and brave counternarratives, are at this point mostly incipient and embodied rather than

³⁷⁶ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 144.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

formalized into widely communicated counternarratives, and without a firm sense of what injustice is being perpetrated against them, a belief in the truth and viability of counternarratives, and a clear idea of what can and should be done, single mothers will struggle to organize and form an effective movement for change.³⁷⁸

A key to mobilizing unmarried mothers for more intentional deconstructive efforts, challenges to the power center, and construction of counternarratives is to demystify the authority of the form of evangelicalism that has been taken as the singular expression of evangelical Christianity. Women need to feel as though they can question and diverge from the narratives and ideals of this one form of the Christian religion without being unfaithful to their tradition. It is vital to the work of constructing an ethical, liberative, just theology that empowers unmarried mothers that these women and those who create such counternarratives with them feel the freedom within their faith traditions to “alter aspects of relationships that do not liberate,” as Mercy Amba Oduyoye states – and that includes relationships with their cultural traditions, with other people, with the socio-political systems in play, and with the theologies that influence their world. One way that this may occur is by introducing alternative forms of evangelical Christianity, social organization, theologies, and ways of addressing the systems of power that produce shame and suffering for unmarried mothers. Just as the interview participants spoke of the significance of seeing leaders who “looked like them” for their empowerment and liberation from shame, finding examples of faithful single mothers who are striving for their own rights and justice – and believing this work to be integral to their Christian affiliation – might similarly offer a sense of license for American single mothers to follow suit.

CHAPTER 5: BUILDING COUNTERNARRATIVES: SINGLE MOTHERHOOD AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

In 2013, over one hundred people, mostly women, sat in a large circle in the South African sun. One by one, the women arose and moved to the center of the circle, where they would each perform a self-written song and traditional dance. Upon the conclusion of her song, the woman would then give a testimony of the change the group had brought to her life. This was not a church service, nor was it a special ceremony. Instead, this was a routine meeting of the Rural Women's Movement, known as RWM, a grassroots social movement consisting of 50,000 traditional women in the rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa's largest province. Founded in 1989 by activist Sizani Ngubane to advance the lives and rights of indigenous women living in rural areas, this organization exists to eliminate poverty, combat gender injustice, and enhance women's participation in local governance. Over 75% of RWM women identify as Christians, and, interestingly, one of the most universally oppressed demographics - single mothers - forms the bulk of its constituency. These women, often pushed to society's margins and shamed within their own faith traditions, have created liberating connections between their Christian faith, their African culture, and their identities and experiences as women, single mothers, and survivors of violence and poverty in a context of patriarchy and white supremacy.

What makes RWM's case of Christian single mothers' advocacy for their own rights exceptional is that research indicates that community organizing and activism can often be

prohibitive to mothers - especially unwed ones – since it involves a considerable investment of time and resources, often with little or no immediate return. Furthermore, when considering faith-based involvement in social movements, C. Melissa Snarr points out that Christian rhetoric encourages self-giving on behalf of others but often discourages advocacy for oneself.³⁷⁹ While there is plenty of robust theology supporting sacrifice for others, and while there are activists and theologians promoting concepts like Rieger and Henkel-Rieger’s “deep solidarity” which gives us the theory and tools to form a collective identity on the basis of our common experience of being Other to the power center, less theology from the pulpit has been directed towards justifying self-advocacy. As I have described in previous chapters, Christian single mothers in the United States have not yet mobilized their faith or collective identity as a political tool, though they often experience marginalization and dire straits. While American single mothers within evangelical Christianity may form collective identities within their individual churches – and these “single parent ministries” are indeed demonstrations of women’s agency and survival strategies, there is a lack of strong critical action by single mothers and Christians to challenge systemic oppression and theologies that prop up these systems and norms. What, then, enables this group in South Africa to collectively mobilize their Christianity to inspire their involvement in such a social movement? I propose that two explanations – 1) that human agency can exploit the ambivalence of religion to manipulate its function as culture and as ideology to either support or counter hegemony, and 2) that a group’s *felt* proximity to power may determine its willingness to challenge that power structure – may contribute to our understanding of how RWM women effectively utilize their religion as a political resource to advocate for their rights and for the dignity of their South African culture. The study of South African women’s various

³⁷⁹ C. Melissa Snarr, “Women’s Working Poverty: Feminist and Religious Alliances in the Living Wage Movement.”

experiences and understandings of motherhood and of God, of their re-appropriation of indigenous tradition, missionary and colonialist influences, and of tenets of Western forms of modernization may reveal agency in the quotidian as a source of resistance against oppression of women and of native Africans.

In this chapter, I will examine how religion's functioning as culture and as ideology in South Africa has operated to establish both a dominant metanarrative that marginalizes single mothers and also practical and constructive theologies that contest this metanarrative and inspire social activism and public critique of hegemonic systems. An understanding of how Christianity has been employed to challenge dominant forms of power and spur liberating social movements can provide precedents and sources for ideologies and theologies that prove liberating to unmarried mothers. Next, I will evaluate black South African women's relation to power and how this influences their ability to organize social action. By comparing the experiences of inclusion and exclusion from benefits of systems in place in the American and South African contexts, we might be able to identify differences that may contribute to the disparity between single mothers' senses of collective action, agency, and willingness to challenge extant systems of power. Finally, I will relate how the findings of my fieldwork with the Rural Women's Movement shed light on the agency, strategies, and conditions that allow these single mothers to mobilize their Christian faith, culture, experiences, and identities in a progressive social movement to their benefit.

South African women practitioners of the Christian faith are creatively weeding through their histories of colonialism, Christianity, and indigenous culture in order to generate a theology that is specifically empowering and mobilizing for unmarried mothers. Religion is, in fact, a potent tool with which to create a national culture of either inequality or liberation and

empowerment of traditionally marginalized groups. As Dean C. Curry writes in his article, “Religion and the New South Africa,” 80% of South Africans identify as Christian; thus, the faith provides a common ground in a nation with great division:

The bedrock of viable, stable democracy is a shared understanding of what constitutes the public good; a common language of moral – and, therefore, political discourse. Without it, democratic government is untenable. In this sense, religion and religious values act as a social glue: informing society’s understanding of the public good, providing the vocabulary of common moral discourse, and, consequently, restraining and bonding centrifugal forces of national life...When used in the service of a partisan political agenda, religion often succumbs to the deceit of human power, becoming just another political player and, at worst, part of the problem of human tyranny.³⁸⁰

While religion is far “just another political player” – indeed, it is always polyvalent, contending, and ambivalent, Curry displays the depth of entrenchment and entanglement of power, domination, patriarchy, and hegemony with religion. However, I contend that the work not only of vocational theologians in Africa but, just as importantly, of Christian women’s work in their quotidian produces a lived theology of resistance to oppression. To explore this work, I will employ an ethnographic methodology, while espousing a phenomenological approach to accepting as reality the meaning of each experience to the participant. In this project, I draw from my own first-hand field work with South African cultures, as well as from other ethnographic, anthropological, and religious scholars’ and activists’ records of South African experiences. I will compare various missionary and African cultural perspectives on women’s roles, especially that of motherhood, then discuss the relationships between concepts of God and women’s roles and how these mutually reinforcing relationships are received, rejected, or appropriated by African women and African theologians today.

³⁸⁰ Dean C. Curry, “Religion and the New South Africa,” in *First Things*, Oct. 1990, accessed July 7, 2016, firstthings.com/article/1990/10/007-religion-and-the-new-south-africa

Why South Africa?

The theologies, ideologies, counternarratives, and cooperative economic and family-rearing practices developed by unmarried mothers in sites where the *constructed* nature of the metanarrative of the patriarchal nuclear family is perceivable can prove to be a powerful means of deconstructing this metanarrative and revealing its collusion with oppressive cultures of capitalism. South Africa supplies just such a context for three reasons. First, the current dynamics in the movement of Christianity around the world indicate that the number of devotees to the faith is stagnating in the Global North but spreading exponentially in the Two-Thirds World. Research by scholars of world Christianities such as Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh, Kwame Bediako, and Carlos Cardoza-Orlandi has noted that, statistically speaking, the “average” Christian nowadays would be a poor woman of color from the Global South. As Bediako notes, “Christianity has become a non-Western religion; which means, not that Western Christianity has become irrelevant, but rather that Christianity may now be seen for what it truly is, a universal religion, and that what has taken place in Africa has been a significant part of this process.”³⁸¹ Rather than Christianity radiating from a powerful “center” in North America and Western Europe, Christianity now has multiple vibrant “centers”, many in the Two-Thirds World. In light of this, it is important for the United States to take note of the vital alternative theologies hailing from the same religion, which are produced in countries who have found liberation from overt political colonization and address issues common to all contexts – especially given the cultural and globalized nature of empire and neocolonialism today that subjugates those outside the power center. In other words, the theologies produced in the Two-Thirds World that have effected and energized political liberation from colonialism might be

³⁸¹ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 3.

useful starting points for constructing effective theologies of liberation for those of us cognizant and pursuant of deep solidarity as those engaged together in a common struggle – although with differentiated experiences, benefits, and oppressions – against hegemony and empire.

Furthermore, much Christian theology coming from grassroots spaces in contexts such as South Africa offers a refreshing revitalization of theology with “feet on the ground,” so to speak. Bediako articulates the distinctiveness and vitality of African theologies in contrast to the institutionalized theologies that are disseminated from the top of religious, power, and social hierarchies to the lay people or people on the margins:

...[We] ought to speak positively of oral, spontaneous, implicit or grassroots theology, as theology which comes from where the faith lives, in the life-situation of the community of faith. Accordingly, this “grassroots” theology is an abiding element of all theology, and therefore, one that it is essential for academic theology to be in touch with, to listen to, to share in, and to learn from, but never to replace. Indeed, academic or written theology cannot replace this spontaneous or grassroots theology, because the two are complementary aspects of one reality and the “spontaneous” is the foundation of the “academic.” Without this vital contact with the spontaneous, grassroots theology, academic theology anywhere can become detached from the community of faith and so be not much more than an exclusive conversation carried on among the guild of scholars, and incapable of communicating life in Jesus Christ to others.³⁸²

South Africa in particular has a long tradition of socialist critique from the earliest days of colonialism in the nation; therefore, there has always been some contestation of aspects of capitalism and its impact within the South African context. What is more, this socialist critique has often come from Christian circles and is thus often considered to be both a viable theory for practical Christian theology and also a possible means of liberation for indigenous South Africans, over and against Western colonialism and neoliberal economics.³⁸³ In the midst of the

³⁸² Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience*. 17-18.

³⁸³ Charles W. Amjad-Ali and Lester Edqin J. Ruiz point to the use of theology to justify empire’s historical and current claim of rights to South African “land, labor, and bodies as that which is entitled to God’s chosen people” of the colonizer, while indigenous and colonized people were viewed as being unworthy of agency or power, thus lending itself to neoliberal and global capitalism’s hierarchies of power.

development of neoliberalism and top-down power dynamics in South Africa, South Africans were using Christian theology and resources – the very tools often used to oppress and colonize them – to resist empire and push for socialized and bottom-up forms of power. Gerald West recounts the development of a theology of struggle rather than a theology of liberation when hopes for socialist political liberation were not fulfilled in Africa and elsewhere. In his article, “The Legacy of Liberation Theologies in South Africa, with an Emphasis on Biblical Hermeneutics,” West traces the development of South African liberation theologies that retain core values of socialist critique – namely, the struggle against systems and structural sin – in the wake of the failure of socialist political movements to unseat neoliberalism’s hegemony. These “strands of liberation theology” include Black Theology, Contextual Theology, and African Women’s Theology. However, rather than being independent or special interest liberation theologies, these strands are interwoven in the tapestry of struggle against systems and structures that are death-dealing, a tapestry that West calls the “ongoing process of God.”³⁸⁴ For example, Black Theology became infused with Marxist historical materialism when the Institute for Contextual Theology was founded in 1970 in South Africa.³⁸⁵ As West describes, race was originally the central critical focus of Black Theology in South Africa, but class quickly joined this focus, followed by gender.³⁸⁶

Among those in South Africa who are producing such intersectional critique with an eye to class are Itumeleng Mosala, who contends that the Bible is “a product and record of class

³⁸⁴ Gerald West, “The Legacy of Liberation Theologies in South Africa, with an Emphasis on Biblical Hermeneutics,” in *Studia Historias Ecclesiasticas*, July 2010: 158.

³⁸⁵ Tinyiko Maluleke, “Black Theology as Public Discourse,” *Constructing a Language of Religion in Public Life: Multi-Event 1999 Academic Workshop Papers*, ed. James R. Cochrane, (Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 1998): 60-62.

³⁸⁶ Gerald West, “The Legacy of Liberation Theologies in South Africa,” 165.

struggles” and that oppression is rooted in the relations of power in society and therefore to economics,³⁸⁷ Alistair Kee,³⁸⁸ and Sampie Terreblanche.³⁸⁹ Additionally, the Institute for Contextual Theology was established to promote and elevate the theologies produced in the context of real South African life and the political, economic, social, and cultural realities of oppression and power struggle therein. Thus, the theologies created or captured by the ICT had a distinctly political character and put the tools for critique and the production of knowledge in the hands of the grassroots, the oppressed.³⁹⁰ This is bottom-up power, a form of socialist critique, not only because it challenges overtly the economic disparities created by capitalism and class but because it resists the structure and distribution of power instituted by capitalism. The Ujamaa Centre has taken up the methodology championed by the ICT of “See-Judge-Act”, using this process in their Contextual Bible Study that they use to read the scriptural texts with the oppressed. By doing this, they place the “master’s tools” – that is, the authority of Scripture – in the hands of the underclass to refute harmful interpretations and created new readings of Scripture informed by their own experiences of struggle. Musa Dube explains the pertinence of this work of interpreting Scripture as the site of the “scramble for Africa”:

...[The] scramble to get Africa back from the colonial clutches was and still is waged through the Bible (yet the Bible is not the only viable weapon.) That the Scramble for Africa was a scramble through the Bible is therefore an interpretation crux...The neoliberal economy known as globalization is the scramble of former colonial powers, in the company of new rising global powers, to have free access to global markets and cheap labor, without necessarily granting the same rights to all countries. In short,

³⁸⁷ Itumeleng Mosala, “The Use of the Bible in Black Theology,” *The Unquestionable Right to Be Free: Essays in Black Theology*, eds. Itumeleng Mosala and Buti Tlhagale, (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1986): 196.

³⁸⁸ Alistair Kee, *The Rise and Demise of Black Theology*, (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2006).

³⁸⁹ Sampie Terreblanche, *A History of Inequality in South Africa: 1652-2002*, (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2002.)

³⁹⁰ Gerald West, “The Legacy of Liberation Theologies in South Africa,” 170-172.

biblical interpretation in the sub-Saharan Africa cannot be separated from politics, economics, and cultural identity, of the past and present. Biblical interpretation in the African continent is thus intimately locked in the framework of scramble for land, struggle for economic justice, and struggle for cultural survival.³⁹¹

In other words, class – and the challenge to capitalism’s distribution of power and creation of class, which often takes on overt and implicit socialist critical tones – is fundamental to the historical struggles for liberation in South Africa because wealth and power have been generated on the backs and through the labor and exploitation of women and of Black, Indian, indigenous, and other non-white South Africans and through the perpetuation and production of racism, sexism, and heteronormativity, homophobia, and ableism.

Interestingly, some of the most direct challenges to neoliberalism has come through African Women’s Theology, which, according to Beverley Haddad, includes and integrates race, class, and culture with gender, the incorporation of which has been an inherent trait of this strand of theology from its inception.³⁹² Because of the apartheid history of South Africa, argues Haddad, there has been a class-based distinction between the work of academic feminists whose work has tended to focus on theory, equality, and alterity and the work of Black and working class activist women, who are engaged in the political liberation struggle not only against white supremacy but against all forms of patriarchy, including Black patriarchy.³⁹³ The formation of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians provided an answer to this schism, seeking

³⁹¹ Musa Dube, “The Scramble for Africa as the Biblical Scramble for Africa: Postcolonial Perspectives,” in *Postcolonial Perspectives n African Biblical Interpretation* 13, eds. Musa W. Dube, Andrew M. Mbuvi, and Dora Mbuwayesango (Atlanta: SBL 2012): 4.

³⁹² Beverley Haddad, “African Women’s Theologies of Survival: Intersecting Faith, Feminism, and Development,” Ph.D. diss. (University of Natal, 2000), http://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10413/4766/Haddad_Beverley_Gail_2000.pdf;sequence=4

³⁹³ Ibid., 156.

to unite since 1989, feminist activism and feminist theory in contextually African modes, recognizing that women's identities and struggles are shaped by a combination of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, even as they map themselves on African women's bodies and lives in differentiated ways. While theologians like Madipoane Masenya, Musa Dube, Gloria Kehilwe Plaatjie, Sarojini Nadar, and Makhosazana Nzimande are producing vibrant postcolonial African feminist theologies that challenge the top-down flow of power inherent in the class structures of neoliberalism, female activists, many of them indigenous, have resisted capitalism and opted for socialized distributions of power and practices of economy since the earliest contact between Western economic interests and South Africa, often through the creation of theologies of struggle and oppression that lend themselves to the empowerment of the marginalized and the deconstruction of the legitimacy of the domination of the power center. For example, Teresa M. Hinga describes three popular images of Christ amongst indigenous African women as 1) the "Personal Companion" who accepts women as they are and accompanies them in suffering rather than demanding women's subjugation, 2) the "Embodiment of the Spirit of Power" in which Christ as embodied Holy Spirit is the "voice of the voiceless and power of the powerless", an image found especially in African Instituted Churches where women are "more vocal," according to Hinga, and 3) the "Iconoclastic Prophet/Champion of the Oppressed and Challenger of the Oppressed." In this last image, Christ as a concrete figure challenges the status quo and overturns power relations on behalf of the marginalized and oppressed.³⁹⁴ Additionally, Nyambura J. Njoroge reflects on a "spirituality of resistance" that she says characterizes the legacy of African postcolonial feminist theologies, which she describes as "contextual

³⁹⁴ Teresa M. Hinga, "Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women in Africa," *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, eds. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1992), 187.

theologies” – African Christians critical articulations and analyses “of their faith in light of their socio-economic, and religio-cultural milieu.”³⁹⁵ Joining these aforementioned theologians, researchers such as Jean and John Comaroff and M. Bahati Kuumba describe the role of civil society – including religious communities – as essential for social and political change; Kuumba in particular discusses the significance of women’s participation in close-knit, civil-society organizations to their empowerment as they socialize property ownership and resources. In these ways, indigenous and other African women have been at the forefront of challenges to neoliberal and neo/colonial power.

South Africa has the unique distinction of being a capitalist nation tied to vestiges of colonialism and white racism, while boasting rural areas still populated by visible indigenous groups who engage in alternative economic practices without being subsumed into the standard features of neoliberal culture – namely, privatization, market deregulation, and consumerism. Catherine Odora Hoppers stated in a speech delivered at a 2008 UNESCO conference that “modernization proceeds in South Africa, but without necessarily following Western values or sequences, but rather with a re-strengthening of core values from different traditions of knowing and living.”³⁹⁶ Evidencing this statement, the Rural Women’s Movement (RWM), a dynamic anti-patriarchal indigenous group, strives to empower women to work together in business in order to leave the employment of white-owned farms and companies. Thus, South Africa is the site of great ambivalence in that it is both a “westernized” participant in global capitalism and in

³⁹⁵ Nyambura J. Njoroge, “Reclaiming Our Heritage of Power: Discovering Our Theological Voices,” *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, 49.

³⁹⁶ Catherine Odora Hoppers, “Life Long Learning in Africa: Lessons, Experiences, and Opportunities from Cultural and Cognitive Justice.”

patriarchal metanarratives and simultaneously a country in which significant contingencies retain their indigenous affiliations.

Beyond the economic systems, considerable South African contingencies find non-authoritative many Western social arrangements and theologies, such as those pertaining to nuclear family structures, due to their failure to reflect and connect with the daily realities and needs of these groups. At the same time, these norms have taken hold in certain sectors of South African society. South Africa thus becomes a sort of crossroads or site of confluence in which multiple identities and traditions collide. In this space, oppositional ideologies, cultures, and identities coexist or strive against one another, and new identities emerge – many of these being hybrids emerging from the collision of cultures and ideologies and from reactions to various iterations of hegemony. For example, we are seeing cases of indigenous South African women who are reinterpreting their traditions and customs through feminist lenses and using the modern South African Constitution to advocate for their rights, as in the Rural Women's Movement's appeal to protections of women against gender-based violence to overturn the Communal Land Rights Act 11 of 2004 and the Traditional Courts Bill of 2008, and white Christians who are developing counter-theologies to contest patriarchal, racist, and oppressive ideologies that have traditionally increased the power of the white ruling class, as we see in the work of the Concerned Evangelicals.

Women of Sub-Saharan Africa embody the postcolonial concepts of mimicry and hybridity that both reinscribe *and* reinterpret the influences of hegemonic powers, through their agency co-opting the rhetoric and concepts of oppressive forces in order to assert their own forms of resistance and liberation that speak specifically from and to

their situations as women of Africa and participants in the Christian faith.³⁹⁷ As Jean Comaroff notes, resistance oftentimes is not directed overtly against neocolonialism but is instead exercised in the quotidian.³⁹⁸ In her ethnographic and historiographic examination of the Tshidi people of the Tswana region of South Africa, Comaroff contends that the Tshidi represent “*specific responses to a structural predicament common to many peripheral Third World peoples; systematic revaluations, mediated by local symbolic orders, of elements of the increasingly global culture of industrial capitalism.*” Comaroff believes that this commonality held by marginalized persons lies in their identity as “determined, yet determining, in their own history; as human beings who, in their everyday production of goods and meanings, acquiesce yet protest, reproduce yet seek to transform their predicament.”³⁹⁹ It is the everyday life of women in Sub-Saharan Africa that most interests me in this project. South Africa offers a site of visible and vocal hybridities and new identities in people who openly recognize their inheritance, so to speak, but that challenge the historical positioning of this inheritance by reinterpreting, reappropriating, and reapplying it in new forms that we may not have seen in large collectivities

³⁹⁷ These concepts are integral features of postcolonial theory, such as that presented by Homi K. Bhabha and as in the theological work of Kwok Pui-lan, and refers to the failure of empire and colonization to totally determine and enforce power over the colonized. The colonized become marked and influenced by the colonizer but retain their own difference and agency, thus resulting in ambivalence, or a duality, that the colonized can exploit for their benefit. Traditional women in southern Africa mimic the expectations of empire in some ways, such as through their roles as mothers and homemakers, but use these roles to lobby for land rights so that they can raise their children successfully. Also, as hybrids, they appeal to the Constitution to support their campaigns for gender equality and rights but seek to elevate these aspects in their historical culture to garner the support of rural persons. These are just a couple of examples of mimicry and hybridity amongst rural women, but these features of postcolonialism can also be seen in African women’s formation of co-ops to participate in capitalist economies and their utilization of religious rhetoric, appeals to the divine, and Christian theologies to support their liberation movements.

³⁹⁸ Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 12.

³⁹⁹ Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance*, 13, 14.

in the United States. This thus provides possible options and alternatives for ways of being, for example, Christian or an unmarried mother or even a capitalist.

Finally, South Africa provides my project with a context in which female-headed households are norms in religious communities rather than necessarily being exceptions or signs of immorality. I will analyze the experiences of single mothers in South Africa, specifically in the KwaZulu-Natal province where the percentage of female-headed households hovers consistently around 45% overall. Amongst black South Africans across all provinces, 77% of children live in households without their fathers, though they may not be raised by a single mother alone but rather with extended family present.⁴⁰⁰ According to the “Social Profile of South Africa” report of census and social statistics between 2002-2009, “female-headed households are much less likely to be single or nuclear and more likely to be some variation of extended than male-headed households.”⁴⁰¹ This indicates that African women might not adhere to the nuclear or single forms of family that predominate in American culture but instead ascribe more to community-based social organization. Could this present an alternative framework that single mothers within Christianity might utilize to produce a counternarrative that demystifies an oppressive patriarchal structure?

What I believe is occurring, based on my research and fieldwork, is that South African single mothers are rejecting what I will call “institutionalized theologies,” or

⁴⁰⁰ The reasons for this high rate of fatherless homes are multiple and include death due to HIV-related illness, holdover attitudes related to lobolo that value men’s virility and ability to impregnate multiple women, even though they may not be able to provide economically for these women and children, and flight to urban centers for employment. Intergenerational households are the norm in rural South Africa, though, as several generations of women and children reside together and in close proximity with other relatives and friends.

eNCA, “Tough Conditions for Black Kids – Stats SA,” November 19, 2013, accessed September 9, 2016, <http://www.enca.com/south-africa/tough-conditions-black-kids-stats-sa>

⁴⁰¹ “Social Profile of South Africa, 2002-2009,” Statistics South Africa, (Pretoria: Statistics South Africa, 2010) <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-19-00/Report-03-19-002009.pdf>, 56.

those propagated by Christian leaders in formal church structures, religious channels, or public forums, and creating their own “incipient theologies,” to use a term coined by James Cochrane. According to West, citing Cochrane, “incipient theology” is a theology that is “not yet born but that is there in the bodies of these women.”⁴⁰² This describes the beliefs that, although perhaps not properly formalized, are expressed through the actions of single mothers like those in the Rural Women’s Movement who may hold seemingly self-contradictory theologies, while simultaneously living out ostensibly decisive theologies regarding the propriety of women’s liberation. For example, Christian single mothers may respond to questions regarding how they believe God views out-of-wedlock pregnancy by saying that this is a sin. However, they will then protest the Christian church’s shaming of single mothers and insist that churches ought to be supportive of single mothers. They may also articulate a belief in God’s love for them and explain that this belief fuels their involvement in movements and activism to seek a better life for themselves and women like them. Through experiencing unconditional love and support in an alternative community in the form of the Rural Women’s Movement, which seeks to discover and mobilize liberative aspects of South African culture, Christian belief, and female experience and knowledge as tools for women’s empowerment, unmarried Christian mothers are developing a self-consciousness that contradicts what institutional theology might have told them about themselves. Furthermore, they are expressing through their actions a theology that connects divine blessing with social activism and communal support, although they are still in the process of articulating a formal theology that proposes new definitions of doctrinal staples like sin,

⁴⁰² Interview with Dr. Gerald West, Ujamaa Centre/University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, April 18, 2016.

James R. Cochrane, Circles of Dignity: Community Wisdom and Theological Reflection, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999).

salvation, and church. Therefore, participants of the Rural Women's Movement are producing "incipient theologies" that can present to other single mothers in contexts such as the United States a precedent for organizing to address economic, social, and political struggles especially faced by this particular demographic, while retaining and being motivated by their identities as Christians. What remains yet to be explored, then, is how and why unmarried Christian mothers in South Africa have been able to mobilize their faith, experiences, and positions in collective action for their empowerment and rights.

Religion as Culture and as Ideology in South Africa

As empire stretches its reach across the globe through neoliberal capitalism, technology, missions, and other neocolonial means, links between nations increase in number – and also in complexity. As hegemonic as globalization is, it also produces a surplus that defies control by the power center in its proliferation of avenues for transnational connection and communication. M. Bahati Kuumba brings attention to the growth of transnational networks, organizations, and strategies as a "counter-hegemony" of "globalization from below" in what she terms an "emergent global civil society."⁴⁰³ Globalization has made national boundaries permeable, but in a move of mimicry and resistance, this global civil society can be a potent space for women to organize in international movements that address and challenge both local specificities of inequality, as well as polyvalent and intersectional global inequalities in "deep solidarity," to employ Rieger and Henkel-Rieger's term.⁴⁰⁴ A primary focus of this chapter is to reflect upon

⁴⁰³ M. Bahati Kuumba, "Transgressive African Feminism: The Possibilities of Global Organisation," *Women's Activism in South Africa*, 262, 265.

⁴⁰⁴ The term "deep solidarity" was created by Joerg Rieger and developed by Rieger and Rosemarie Henkel Rieger in their book *Unified We Are a Force: How Faith and Labor Can Overcome America's Inequalities*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2016).

the public presence of Christian single mothers in social movements advocating for their own rights and embodying values that appear consistent with postcolonial feminist theology and socialist values. Given the dearth of such movements in the United States, it is of primary concern to me to explore possible theories, theologies, and practices that can be discerned or developed from observation of the witness of these women and other South African champions of social justice, employing a feminist reflexive lens to reflect on my own social location and national context. My hope is that the counternarratives articulated and embodied by the people encountered in these pages might offer my own American context alternatives to consider, connect with, draw inspiration from, and adapt to address our particular situations of oppression and injustice. The counternarratives discovered and developed here might be a means of “speaking back” to the American Christian Church of its complex and ambivalent identity as perpetrator and perpetuator of neocolonialism, potential resource for justice and change, and home of communities of single mothers who, given the opportunity and resources, might be the very agents of justice and change we need.

Working with an American theory that may help interpret and translate cross-culturally and transnationally the use and impact of religion in the case studies of my ethnographic work to “talk back” to an American context, I find Rhys H. Williams’ theory of religion as culture and as ideology a helpful framework for discerning differences in the deployment of religion in South Africa and in the United States. Williams’ theory offers insight into how Christianity has been mobilized for progressive activism that challenges dominant systems of biopower in South Africa, including those supported by certain forms of Christianity. As discussed in the previous chapter, religion functions as both culture and ideology by formulating ideal visions of the world and diagnosing causes for the deviance of reality from that ideal. As ideology, religion produces

metanarratives and belief systems that shape the lenses through which adherents view the world and to which adherents attempt to orient their – and others’ – lives. As culture, religion creates rituals, routines, cultural productions, values, laws, and practices that are designed to reputedly bring about the ideal world and drive away threats to this ideal. As such, religion can be mobilized as a powerful political tool. The historical precedents of Christian social activism, like the Black Church’s role in American civil rights, Christians’ work to end apartheid, and Christian-base communities in Central and South America, and supporting theologies, such as varieties of liberation theology, appear to display four primary characteristics, which are also discernable in RWM members’ Christianity – namely, the embrace of a communitarian spirit over privatization or individualization, a preference for grassroots, bottom-up flows of power and rejection of top-down power, a non-dualistic worldview that embraces the unity of the physical and spiritual, and a high tolerance for ambivalence and contestation. Citing the presence of these values within historical liberation movements involving Christians helps solidify these four features as part of South African and Christian culture and indicates that they are key to the mobilization of religion as an alternative culture and ideology that inspires social activism and challenges dominant beliefs and systems. This is often done through storytelling, an important cultural hermeneutics for African women, because this accessible and traditional form of “theologizing” creates an interstitial space for the South African indigenous woman-as-hybrid. By engaging in storytelling, the woman reclaims the dignity and power of a traditional mode of knowledge production and transmission to retell the stories of South Africa and its women, yet she also engages in cultural hermeneutics, which Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro defines as the utilization of insights from cultural analysis in evaluating which traditions should be kept and

which should be abandoned.⁴⁰⁵ According to Mercy Amba Oduyoye, stories allows the storyteller to interpret social reality, transmit values, and pass on wisdom.⁴⁰⁶ Thus, the methodology espoused in the previous chapter of postcolonial feminist theology, with the centrality given to storytelling, is not only a relevant methodological lens for critically analyzing and theorizing about South African Christian women's activism and theologies but is also a means by which South African Christian women are transmitting their values while simultaneously producing counternarratives with their storytelling and the contextual application and interpretation of these stories.

Kwok Pui-lan calls this "imagination" – that is, the process through which the values of community, bottom-up power, non-dualism of spiritual and material, and ambivalence and contestation are transmitted through storytelling as religious culture-and-ideology of resistance against religious culture-and-ideology of hegemonic biopower. To imagine, argues Kwok, is to discern that something is not fitting, to search for new images, and to arrive at new patterns of meaning and interpretation.⁴⁰⁷ Kwok's description of diasporic imagination and dialogical imagination are particularly apt. In diasporic imagination, the storyteller selects pieces of myths and legends from her cultural and historical memory and resources to weave tales that are then refashioned and retold in each generation with new materials added to confront new circumstances and contexts and to "reinvent the identity of a people" – in the case of postcolonial feminist theologies and activism, a people who struggle with God for liberation against the

⁴⁰⁵ Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro, "Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Contribution," *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, ed. Musa W. Dube, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001): 101-113.

⁴⁰⁶ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 19-76.

⁴⁰⁷ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 30.

systems of sin and oppression of that day.⁴⁰⁸ Sizani Ngubane of the Rural Women's Movement speaks often of stories as a means of liberation and resistance, retelling her own story of activism and involvement in resistance to apartheid frequently and encouraging RWM women to retell their stories to reinvent indigenous South Africa as empowering to women. Dialogical imagination involves an ongoing conversation among different cultural traditions and "attempts to bridge the gaps of time and space, create new horizons, and connect disparate elements of our lives into a meaningful whole."⁴⁰⁹ This is the work undertaken by the Rural Women's Movement, the Ujamaa Centre, and other postcolonial and liberation activists and theologians in South Africa; specifically, in RWM, they are engaging their dialogical imagination to recover an indigenous tradition that is liberative and subversive to the power center and diffuse binaries. It is dialogical imagination that this dissertation aims to engage, listening to and imagining with African Christian single mothers whose stories can transcend the binary of East and West through the common experience of struggle as single mother. As they lead the way in telling a story of their participation in a religion and culture that was not always or wholly in the hands of the power center but that was porous enough for dissonance and difference to flow in and out, single mothers might discover a transnational counternarrative of community, empowerment, liberation, and resistance to deconstruct a patriarchal empire cloaked in religious justification. Thus, storytelling will feature primarily in this chapter as a means of undertaking and reflecting the postcolonial feminist theological process of imagining. In light of Williams' theory, it appears that South African Christian activists have imagined an alternative religion-as-ideology-and-culture and transmitted that vision through embodiment and storytelling that reinforces the

⁴⁰⁸ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 46.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

four values discerned in their appropriation of culture and Christianity which do not appear as frequently in American evangelical single mothers' – and other American evangelicals' theologies and practices.

Today, roughly 80% of South Africans identify as Christian. Formal Christianity was introduced to South Africa first with the appearance of Dutch and Portuguese slave traders, then later with the advent of colonialism, but Christian missionaries' and African converts' relationships to colonial power and empire were ambivalent and diverse from the beginning. In the 1600s, the Dutch colonialist, "Afrikaner" identity was forged through the Dutch Reformed Church, which emphasized order and divinely ordained, hierarchical roles, such as those associated with gender and race.⁴¹⁰ This theology formed the basis of the race- and gender-based oppressions of apartheid and patriarchy. However, from the inception of Christianity's introduction to the country, black South Africans utilized their Christian faith as an impetus to counter the oppression they faced by colonizers, white South Africans, and even missionaries. The Christian Scriptures were translated to Zulu early in the missionary movement, one of the major factors that later allowed for the development of a black South African theology of liberation. This translatability of the Christian Scriptures into the vernacular languages of South Africa increased lay people's ability to read and interpret the Bible for themselves and to use the Bible to challenge oppression in their context. Thus, grassroots interpretations of Scripture were an early means of challenging oppression, and, additionally, diverse interpretations and applications of the Bible and Christianity became a staple of a uniquely South African theology.⁴¹¹ Corroborating this, in his book *The Stolen Bible*, Gerald West differentiates between

⁴¹⁰ Dean C. Curry, "Religion and the New South Africa."

⁴¹¹ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience*, 15-17.

African's response and reception of the Bible and their response and reception of Christianity, the latter being a tool of Western imperialism.⁴¹² West details cases of the agency of South African receivers of missionary efforts, cases in which indigenous South Africans asserted their ability to claim the Bible as their own and Christianity as the agenda of colonialism. In the case of Mmahuto, the senior wife of Mothibi, chief of the Ba Tlhaping people, Mmahuto questions missionary John Campbell, who arrived in her community in 1813, in such a way that she "[pries] the Bible from the hands of the missionaries." She recognizes that the Bible is power and knowledge and thus can be manipulated by those who control it. As West writes, the bearer of the Bible might not fully understand its power and knowledge; therefore, the missionaries cannot fully control the Bible, and so others might access its power.⁴¹³ The Bible contains a surplus signification.

In another example that displays both an indigenous challenge to commodity capitalism and the significance of storytelling for resistance and theology-making in South African culture and religion, Isaiah Shembe, a Zulu minister in the early 1900s, wove his deep knowledge of economics, the "mission Bible", and African tradition into a "hybrid body of religious truth that competed with ideologies of state and Christian mission." According to West, Shembe's biblical mastery came not through missionary efforts but was formed through Zulu oral culture. Shembe felt the agency to construct contextual counternarratives of the Bible in Zulu culture that contradicted interpretations of Scripture taught by missionaries. For instance, Shembe reread Deuteronomy's passages on divorce and adultery to free the wife from blame and place the onus

⁴¹² Gerald West, *The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon*, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2016).

⁴¹³ Gerald West, "(Ac)claiming the (Extra)ordinary African 'Reader' of the Bible," *Reading Other-wise: Socially Engaged Biblical Scholars Reading with Their Local Communities*, ed. Gerald O. West, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001): 32-34.

on the male adulterer. Rather than perpetuating the teaching that Deuteronomy blames divorce and adultery on women, as though they have failed to please their spouses, Shember taught that women are free to leave their adulterous partners and marry again, that the male adulterer must give his home to his wife, and that inheritances in the case of an adulterous husband must go either to the wronged wife or to the firstborn son, who may use the inheritance only according to his mother's will.⁴¹⁴ Furthermore, the Xhosa accepted a uniquely contextual Christianity preached to them by a man named Nitsikana who claimed that he converted to the faith before ever meeting a missionary. His theology was based on what he already knew about God, and he preached and wrote hymns with a rich continuity between African tradition and the biblical God.⁴¹⁵ In such a way, Nitsikana, Mmahuto, Shembe and others not only asserted their agency to create new interpretations of the Bible and Christian theology that grew from the roots of South African culture but embraced and exploited the ambivalence of Scripture for their empowerment. Thus, biblical interpretation became an early tool of challenging patriarchy and the authority of empire.

Furthermore, Christianity in South Africa had to be communicated through African traditional religious terms and ideas, thus linking pre-Christian religious cultures with Christianity.⁴¹⁶ In such a way, African culture remained wove itself into Christianity, creating a non-dualistic syncretism that was distinctly African amidst an increasingly powerful white-dominated society. This hybridity of African culture with Christianity contributed to a grassroots

⁴¹⁴ Gerald O. West, "(Ac)Claiming the (Extra)Ordinary African 'Reader' of the Bible," in *Reading Otherwise*, 40-41.

⁴¹⁵ Sebastian Kim and Kirsten Kim, *Christianity as a World Religion*, (London: Continuum, 2008), 72.

⁴¹⁶ Norman Etherington, "Kingdoms of This World and the Next: Christian Beginnings among Zulu and Swazi," in *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*, eds. Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport, (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1997): 101.

theology, which arose from black South Africans' seeking the divine in the quotidian.⁴¹⁷ This non-dualistic character and contextual methodology of producing black South African theology would allow this iteration of Christianity to become a prime vehicle for political and social activism as it sought to engage with diverse lived experiences of black South Africans while retaining pride in indigenous South African culture.

Resisting Apartheid

With the emergence of postmillennial theologies, which argue that God will use humans to perfect society before Christ's return, a form of Social Christianity developed that was particular to the South African context, and many missionaries and laypersons sought to create a Christian response to racism and inequality.⁴¹⁸ However, in 1923, the Federal Council of Dutch Reformed Churches agreed to support discriminatory laws that perpetuated white domination, including the Natives Land Act, which limited the amount of African-owned land, forcing black Africans to work in a white-dominated economy for inadequate pay.⁴¹⁹ Disillusioned by racism in churches, many Africans formed independent churches and articulated a Christian theology born out of their collective experience of oppression as black South Africans at the hands of a broad-reaching hegemony. Inspired by the South African value of *ubuntu*, in which equality and communal responsibility are chief virtues, South African Christian activism took shape around a commitment to equal and fair distribution of land and equal, just access to rights. Like other

⁴¹⁷ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 15-17.

⁴¹⁸ Wallace G. Mills, "Millennial Christianity, British Imperialism, and African Nationalism," *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*, eds. Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport, (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1997), 342.

⁴¹⁹ Richard Elphick, "The Benevolent Empire and the Social Gospel: Missionaries and South African Christians in the Age of Segregation," *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*, eds. Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport, (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1997), 360.

liberation theologies, black theology in South Africa drew upon its non-dualistic South African ideology to envision Christ as the great liberator of all persons, confronting injustice, human constructs, and oppression to complete God's will in creation and calling Christians to actively deconstruct injustice and oppression. Furthermore, like other forms of liberation theology, black South African liberation theology incorporated aspects of Marxism, which echoed South Africa's value of *ubuntu* or communitarian mutual responsibility and also provided an impetus for Christians and activists to engage in class analysis, critique of capitalism, and labor issues because of its rejection of hegemonic, top-down flows of power.⁴²⁰ In 1912, leaders of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Africa founded the African National Congress, which boasted an active contingency of Christian clergy and laypeople.⁴²¹ During the ANC's Defiance Campaign, these members resisted racist legislation, rejected the colour bar in industry, and called for adequate housing, pensions for black South Africans, and improved educational, medical, and welfare services.⁴²²

When the National Party won the 1948 election in South Africa, the Dutch Reformed Church gained power in South Africa as well. By the 1970s and 1980s, a strong contingency of evangelical Christians joined anti-apartheid activism, forgoing their traditionally apolitical stance. In 1985, Christian activists published the famous Kairos Document, calling attention to the ambivalence of Christianity by condemning "church theology" for its emphasis on social change through reconciliation rather than through deconstruction and destruction of evil and

⁴²⁰ Richard Elphick, "The Benevolent Empire and the Social Gospel: Missionaries and South African Christians in the Age of Segregation," 384.

⁴²¹ Wallace G. Mills, "Millennial Christianity, British Imperialism, and African Nationalism," 346.

⁴²² Peter Walshe, "Christianity and the Anti-Apartheid Struggle: The Prophetic Voice within Divided Churches," *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*, eds. Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport, (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1997), 383.

oppressive social systems and orders.⁴²³ This document was a declaration that many Christians believed that God sided with the marginalized and called for the formation of prophetic theologies, thus creating a safe space for the identification and voicing of counternarratives that challenged the existing state and church theologies that supported the hegemonic status quo. According to Gerald West, the Kairos Document recognized a “people’s theology,” of which incipient theology is one form, that developed in the context of different public and personal issues and addressed these issues, and that these theologies were in fact prophetic.⁴²⁴ The Kairos Document and those aligned with this were able to make public and mobilize the prophetic strains of these people’s theologies to confront and contest what they deemed to be the evil and oppressive ideologies and cultures that many South African churches, theologies, and citizens were tolerating or promoting.

The Concerned Evangelicals

Mainline Christians were not the only figures joining the anti-apartheid resistance from a faith-based perspective. Although Pentecostal denominations tended to take apolitical stances during this era, some faith leaders took strong stands against apartheid. One such individual was Pentecostal leader and ANC member Frank Chikane. A member of the Apostolic Faith Mission, Chikane joined the Student Christian Movement in the 1970s and guided this group towards political activism.⁴²⁵ Between 1977 and 1982, Chikane was detained four times and tortured by

⁴²³ Peter Walshe, “Christianity and the Anti-Apartheid Struggle: The Prophetic Voice within Divided Churches,” 392.

⁴²⁴ Interview with Dr. Gerald West, Ujamaa Centre/University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, April 18, 2016.

⁴²⁵ “Historical Overview of Pentecostalism in South Africa.” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., October 5, 2006, accessed July 27, 2016, pewforum.org/2006/10/05/historical-overview-of-pentecostalism-in-south-africa

the police for his leadership in anti-apartheid activism, and he was even interrogated by the white deacon of his own church.⁴²⁶ Inspired by the Kairos Document, Chikane, along with other Christian activists, founded the Concerned Evangelicals in 1985 to oppose the conservative Evangelical Fellowship of South Africa, thus giving rise to an identifiable strand of progressive evangelicalism that countered conservative Christianity, free-market economics, and reconciliation prior to restitution. In 1986, 132 Concerned Evangelicals wrote and published a treatise, known as the *Evangelical Witness in South Africa: South African Evangelicals Critique Their Own Theology and Practice*, based on the Kairos Document but specific to evangelical theologies and congregations. In this document, the authors claim that evangelical theology had been so influenced by “American and European missionaries with political, social, and class interests which were contrary or even hostile to both the spiritual and social needs of [South African] people” that it was “inadequate to address the crisis [South Africa was] facing” and thus supported the status quo.⁴²⁷ The Concerned Evangelicals offered an open censure of evangelical theologies and practices as biased in favor white South Africans and towards Western entities and identities that privileged middle- and upper-class capitalist interests.

Furthermore, the Concerned Evangelicals not only utilized the Christian Scriptures to show the depravity of the evangelical theologies and behaviors at play and to spur radical, transformative repentance and activism but also exhibited how certain strains of indigenous South African culture were actually more akin to the heart of the Christian gospel than were the current practices of evangelical churches. For example, in the preface of the treatise, the authors express that their hope is that “this document will generate constructive discussions amongst

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Concerned Evangelicals, *Evangelical Witness in South Africa: South African Evangelicals Critique Their Own Theology and Practice*, (London: Regnum, 1986), 10.

evangelical Christians to sharpen their theological tools to enable them to be effective in their ministry and to respond accordingly to the crisis [South Africans] are facing in this country.”⁴²⁸

In other words, the methodology for transformation and action on the part of evangelical churches, according to the Concerned Evangelicals, necessitates an understanding that theology is always partial and provisional, a process that requires a grassroots or bottom-up flow of power – that is, constant dialogue with persons from all levels of and identities in society and the Christian community. They further support this grassroot power that is also valued by traditional South African culture by saying that Jesus “did not turn the world upside down from the top for the benefit of the affluent and the powerful in the Jewish society” but instead “turned the world upside down from below for the benefit of the poor and powerless.”⁴²⁹ A bottom-up flow of power that counters top-down, hegemonic power coheres with an aspect of South African tradition embraced by many liberation groups and activists. The embrace of this value by the Concerned Evangelicals sets a precedent for evangelical Christians to develop a distinctively South African evangelicalism geared towards social action and the dismantling of oppressive systems.

Additionally, in this same document, the Concerned Evangelicals advocate for a non-dualistic worldview, another staple of South African tradition – and one which counters prominent modern expressions of Christianity:

What this dualism [that has developed in Western theologies and that privileges the spiritual to the neglect of the social] has done is that one can live a pietistic ‘spiritual’ life and still continue to oppress, exploit, and dehumanize people. And those who are victims of this oppression, exploitation, and dehumanization are prohibited from complaining or

⁴²⁸ Concerned Evangelicals, *Evangelical Witness in South Africa*, 11.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 15.

resisting it because this would amount to worrying about material things that have nothing to do with one's spirituality.⁴³⁰

Interestingly, on this point, *Evangelical Witness in South Africa* overtly ties this non-dualistic theology to South African traditional spirituality. According to the Concerned Evangelicals, this African worldview is consistent with the Biblical Judeo-Christian non-dualistic view of life:

The African form of spirituality is also the same [as the Jewish biblical principle of living the spiritual life in their social life.] For an ordinary African birth, death, employment and unemployment, having a house and not having a house, being sick, attacked or not having money, all had to do with the Supreme Being called Modimo, Unkulunkulu, Tixo, etc. Their ancestors (bodimo, etc.) were understood as being involved in everything that affected them in all aspects of life. The concept of dualism is therefore a foreign concept to both the African and the Judeo-Christian traditions. This is not a biblical concept. It is but a Greek and Western concept.⁴³¹

As the authors explain, many strains of Western evangelicalism have adopted a dualistic worldview that allows humans to claim to be Christian while ignoring or even contributing to material and social oppression. Part of the problem, according to the Concerned Evangelicals, is that the evangelical Christianity that has predominated in South Africa, especially amongst white congregations, has been imported from and imposed upon South Africans by Western entities and has therefore shaped up to support these entities' interests. These problematic theologies call for blind obedience to authority and the promotion of capitalism as Christian values while simultaneously censuring those who critique the atrocities, oppressions, and inequality wrought by racist and sexist authority and the market system as contradicting God's chosen leaders and as being wrongfully earthly-minded instead of being concerned with the greater, spiritual things of heaven. By critiquing dominant Western forms of evangelicalism, with their dualistic worldviews and promotion of top-down power and obedience to hierarchy, and by identifying

⁴³⁰ Concerned Evangelicals, *Evangelical Witness in South Africa*, 16.

⁴³¹ Ibid., 17.

South African tradition as offering a helpful counternarrative to these theologies, the Concerned Evangelicals took a bold step of championing a distinctly South African, evangelical liberation theology that openly acknowledged the ability of aspects of South African culture and beliefs to redeem evangelical Christianity and empower a faithful resistance to oppression.

Furthermore, *Evangelical Witness in South Africa* is notable for its critique, from an evangelical Christian perspective, of neoliberal capitalism and of the blind support Christian churches offer this system. The authors of this text have rightfully identified that economic interests operate insidiously to shape the popular theologies and values that predominate in Christianities that support the status quo. Whether or not adherents to these forms of Christianity recognize that they are supporting beliefs and practices that benefit a particular class, race, and sex of persons to the detriment and exclusion of others, economic interests still underlie the privileging of certain scriptural interpretations, certain biblical voices, certain values, and certain decisions and leaders, as well as the demonization of other groups, systems, cultures, interpretations, voices, and values:

To these groups and churches what is called western Christian civilization or the western capitalistic culture is seen as identical with the Christian faith or the demands of the gospel. Any other system (especially economic) which is not necessarily capitalist is taken as being atheistic and therefore anti-christian [*sic*]. In their faith they cannot see a possibility of being socialist and also Christian. Tragically these Christians miss the biblical obligation to measure and critique all systems, capitalist, socialist, Marxist etc. on the basis of biblical norms. [...The Concerned Evangelicals] are convinced that the western capitalist culture has become an idol of these groups. It has become their god which they so love and worship. We are also convinced that there are other interests than those of the gospel which move these people to act against any struggle for justice in this country. We believe that it is the class interest of these people, their position of dominance in our society, their being beneficiaries of this racist apartheid system, which moves them, rather than the gospel.⁴³²

⁴³² Concerned Evangelicals, *Evangelical Witness in South Africa*, 27.

Significantly, the authors recognized that theologies and practices in Christianity must be analyzed with an eye to class, asking, “Whose interests do these theologies support and whose do they harm?”

The relationship of South Africa with Christianity can be described as, in a word, ambivalent. But what has always been present is an identifiable contingency of progressive Christian activism that readily struggles against top-down, hegemonic power. Moreover, there is a rich tradition in South Africa of recognition of contesting voices within Christianity, of Christian socialism, and of open critique of and resistance to racism, sexism, and class inequality and injustice. Thus, the Rural Women’s Movement has as a precedent for activist Christian involvement in anti-apartheid resistance, motivated by unique South African liberation theologies connecting aspects of indigenous culture with other ideologies and liberating elements of Christianity.

South African Women in Christianity and Activism

Williams’ theory that religion can function as legitimation for an alternative ideology, motivate the active quest to deconstruct oppressive cultural norms, and advocate for a different reality coincides with RWM women’s interpretation and utilization of their faith, which is shaped by the four unique characteristics of South African Christianity: communitarianism, bottom-up flows of power, nondualism between spirit and material, and high tolerance for ambivalence. However, this does not fully capture the distinctiveness of black South African women’s ability to organize and mobilize social movements. If we take Williams’ theory alone, we could assume that any group with similar commitments to alternative cultures and ideologies and with corroborating theologies could effectively organize a social movement. Yet considering

the dearth of social movements for single mothers (particularly within faith traditions), we see that moral indignation and an awareness of struggles is not always sufficient grounds for mobilization. Instead, Mary Bernstein's theory of relationship to power allows us to recognize the intersectionality of black South African women's identities and experiences and consider how this matrix of oppressions positions them in relation to the power center in their society and perhaps increases their potential for social movement organization. In Bernstein's 1997 study of LGBT activist groups, she concludes that when a group has proximity to or feels itself to benefit from the status quo or the power center's norms, it is less likely to openly engage in identity or innovative social movements that challenge the very system or power structure itself and instead engage in movements that seek their inclusion into this power structure. Groups that do not believe themselves to be benefiting from the systems and norms in place are more likely to engage in identity or innovative social movements, such as the Rural Women's Movement, that seek to deconstruct what they view as harmful systems and power structures.⁴³³

I propose that a possible factor in these women's ability to organize effectively is that RWM women perceive themselves to be distanced from power in their society and do not express the hope of attaining considerable power individually without intervention or communal support. While single mothers in the United States are also distanced from power, their widespread oppression is often masked by the inclusion of some female heads of household into the middle class or "reconciled" back into their churches or societies. These women are touted as precedents of single mothers' achievement of the American Dream with the proper application of

⁴³³ The participation of Christian single mothers in the Rural Women's Movement can properly be categorized as both an identity-based social movement (one that seeks to bring awareness of and acceptance for a group which experiences oppression, neglect, or vilification based on their identity as African Christian single mothers) and as an innovative social movement (in that it aims to introduce or change norms or values of patriarchy and the male-headed nuclear family).

work ethic and conformity to mainstream norms. In South Africa, power, read here as control over resources and decision-making and access to resources for thriving, is generally found amongst the white, male, economically empowered, and/or land-owning demographic. In this context, single mothers face inordinate economic, social, and cultural pressures, at times even at the hands of their own faith communities that perpetuate shaming rhetoric for those who experience out-of-wedlock pregnancy. The extreme social and economic disparities they suffer cut across gender, racial, and class lines. In South Africa, 52% of black African women live in poverty and are more likely to experience long-term unemployment than any other group. 16 million women in South Africa live on government grants, which provide women with children R300 (\$18.70 USD) per month, and four out of every ten black South African children are raised by single mothers. Furthermore, in 2011, 32.5% of black South African women were unemployed, compared to only 6.7% of white South African women and 5% of white South African men, and unemployment rates were highest in rural and tribal areas like KwaZulu-Natal.⁴³⁴ Most RWM women work in agriculture or as home-based caregivers for the sick, elderly, and disabled. Home-based caregivers often do not get paid, and RWM women who engage in agriculture make a range of R50-R600 (\$3.09-\$37.40 USD) per month.⁴³⁵ Thus, black South African women, especially those who are single mothers and those in rural areas, may feel themselves distanced from and neglected by power systems determined by race, economic standing, gender, and marital status.

Given that they may feel they do not benefit from the current systems in place and therefore have little to lose, black South African single mothers may be more motivated than

⁴³⁴ “Labour market dynamics in South Africa, 2014 report,” Statistics South Africa, Last modified April 2015, accessed January 29, 2016, <http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=4445>

⁴³⁵ Interview with Sizani Ngubane, May 19, 2015.

others to engage in social activism. Female activists within present-day movements such as the Rural Women's Movement are not necessarily vanguards in Christian social action; instead, there is a rich tradition of female involvement in social movements and activist leadership in South Africa. Combined with the reclamation of aspects of traditional South African culture that are empowering to women – and especially mothers, the history of Christian women's progressive activism has played a major role in allowing contemporary indigenous women to feel a sense of propriety as Christians and, sometimes, as mothers to engage in activism and to view their oppression or struggles as a violation of their human rights, their faith's values, and their African culture.

A Brief History

In the 19th century, the ideology of gendered, separate spheres became a popular message in mission churches, thus ostensibly reducing women's access to power in church and society. Western missionaries argued that Christian marriage would be more liberating for women than traditional African marriages, yet these missionaries opposed women's agency within Christian marriages.⁴³⁶ Because Western figures and systems largely ignored women except as wives and mothers, African women's land ownership, salaried work, and economic activity was thought to transgress ordained gender roles and to undercut the ideal of the middle-class family in which the man was the primary breadwinner.⁴³⁷ To increase African men's skills and potential in the labor market, the capitalist system needed women to stay home to take on the burden of domestic care.

⁴³⁶ Norman Etherington, "Kingdoms of This World and the Next: Christian Beginnings among Zulu and Swazi," 103.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 102.

In this model, the woman was not only prohibited from challenging her husband's role as head of the household and spiritual representative of the family but was also isolated from her community in the newfound configuration of the nuclear family, which undermined the South African value of communitarianism and *ubuntu*.⁴³⁸

However, prayer groups, called *manyanos*, proliferated amongst black South Africans in the 20th century and gave women space for spiritual expression, preaching, and action.⁴³⁹ Interestingly, as Deborah Gaitskell notes, black South African women proved more effective at organizing themselves in church groups than did white South African women.⁴⁴⁰ This channel for black South African women's agency provided them, newly secluded from one another in their nuclear families, a space in which to gather, create, and empower one another. Furthermore, these groups would combine a valuation of political power, motherhood, and African culture with their Christianity. With colonization and, later, apartheid, gender and racial hierarchies solidified male power while devaluing black women's roles and work as mothers. In pre-Christian South Africa, motherhood was a vital and celebrated role for women, a value echoed in mission Christianity but adapted into the male-headed nuclear family structure. Women in pre-colonial South Africa had limited political power officially, but their productive and reproductive roles granted them notable status and power in society. *Manyanos* continued this celebration of motherhood and were largely welcoming of single mothers and those deemed sinful by other

⁴³⁸ Norman Etherington, "Kingdoms of This World and the Next: Christian Beginnings among Zulu and Swazi," 102.

⁴³⁹ Elizabeth Elbourne and Robert Ross, "Combating Spiritual and Social Bondage: Early Missions in the Cape Colony," *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*, eds. Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport, (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1997), 50.

⁴⁴⁰ Deborah Gaitskell, "Power and Prayer in Service: Women's Christian Organizations," *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*, eds. Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport, (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1997), 254.

Christian groups, since African communities traditionally valued participation by as many people as possible in public, communal issues.⁴⁴¹ They offered mutual support to one another, and their church communities became an alternative form of kin network. Thus, *manyanos* became spaces in which women formed a collective identity as females, mothers, Christians, and black South Africans.

While missionary groups began to train African males for ministry, they focused almost exclusively on training women for domestic duties. However, this lack of formal training in ministry and theology actually allowed South African Christian women to embrace their African culture as their distinctive South African Christianity took shape. In traditional African culture, women often shared folk tales, speeches, and songs with a responding group, writes Gaitskell, and these women's illiteracy and lack of formal training allowed them to experiment and create their own unique South African woman's Christianity that arose directly from their daily experiences and identities.⁴⁴² Thus, these women served as "grassroots" preachers, delivering messages of the Christian gospel in distinctly South African modes of communication, so that their Christianity was inextricably bound up not only with South African culture but with their experiences as women.

Beyond their work as grassroots preachers, South African women were leaders in liberation movements in South Africa, often taking on gender-based issues within the wider justice causes for which they worked. Because South African ideology rejected a dualistic worldview that separated sacred and secular power, African women viewed spiritual power and

⁴⁴¹ Deborah Gaitskell, "Power and Prayer in Service: Women's Christian Organizations," 261.

⁴⁴² Ibid., 264.

political power as integrally connected.⁴⁴³ They believed in a deity whose power extended to the whole world, and so salvation is figured temporally rather than spatially, according to Sebastian and Kirsteen Kim; this belief gave impetus to the struggle for earthly liberation as the work in which God is engaged.⁴⁴⁴ As *manyano* women prayed about and discussed their daily experiences and those of their families and communities, their attentions turned to “political” (that is, that which controls and governs the people’s lives) and justice issues, like the availability of health and social services for black South Africans. In 1913, *manyanos* led protests against pass laws that required black South Africans to carry Afrikaner-issued passes in order to legally move about publicly in the country. These activist *manyanos* later became the model for the Women’s League, a branch of the ANC established because women did not get full membership and voting rights in the ANC until 1943. Additionally, their example of activism served as the predecessor of and precedent for the Women’s League’s anti-pass protests against the apartheid government.⁴⁴⁵ On October 27, 1955, more than 2,000 women marched on Pretoria’s government buildings, protesting pass laws in silence and leaving signed anti-pass statements at the doors of the buildings. The following year, the Federation of South African Women gathered 20,000 women to march to the capital, resulting in the arrest of several thousand women for civil disobedience.⁴⁴⁶ Appealing to women’s identities as mothers in order to incite them to action for their children’s futures, both the Federation of South African Women

⁴⁴³ Deborah Gaitskell, “Power and Prayer in Service: Women’s Christian Organizations,” 254.

⁴⁴⁴ Sebastian Kim and Kirsteen Kim, *Christianity as a World Religion*, 65-66.

⁴⁴⁵ Estelle B. Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*, (New York: Random House, 2002), 102.

⁴⁴⁶ M. Bahati Kuumba, “‘You’ve Struck a Rock’: Comparing Gender, Social Movements, and Transformation in the United States and South Africa,” in *Gender and Society*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Aug. 2002): 508.

and the Women's League penned the Women's Charter in 1954, demanding suffrage for all women of all ethnicities in South Africa, the redistribution of land to black South Africans and specifically to indigenous women, the reformation of marriage laws, and the prohibition of child labor.⁴⁴⁷ What is fascinating about these Christian female anti-apartheid activists is that not only were they at the forefront of the struggle for liberation but they also formed their own exclusively female groups that recognized that South African women's experiences of apartheid and of patriarchy itself differed from men's.⁴⁴⁸ They formed their common, collective identities on the basis of their womanhood, motherhood, South African culture, and Christianity and utilized their four unique characteristics of an indigenous liberation theology – communitarianism, grassroots sharing of power, non-dualistic worldviews, and embrace of plurality and ambivalence.

Since the rise of the new democracy in 1994, Christian women in South Africa have continued to have a noteworthy presence in progressive social movements, embracing, producing, and applying South African liberation theology in ways that prove empowering to females. For example, many of the Concerned Evangelicals who in 1986 issued the Evangelical Witness in South Africa have now started Contextual Bible Study organizations which seek to produce prophetic theology that empowers the poor, marginalized, and oppressed in a specifically South African context. In KwaZulu-Natal, the Ujamaa Centre is a primary source for such prophetic theology, and much of this work is being done by women. Female activists, theologians, and pastors are taking stands against gender-based violence, in support of LGBTQ+

⁴⁴⁷ Estelle B. Freedman, *No Turning Back*, 102-103.

⁴⁴⁸ M. Bahati Kuumba, "'You've Struck a Rock': Comparing Gender, Social Movements, and Transformation in the United States and South Africa," 506.

identities, and for economic empowerment of traditional women in rural areas. They maintain that the Bible is indissolubly tied with culture and that the appropriate way to carry forth this relationship is to read the Bible in ways that liberate those on the margins – and then to take action on these interpretations. In an interview with Ujamaa Centre director, Dr. Gerald West, I learned that Contextual Bible Study groups are thriving on the margins of South African civil society, providing a visible alternative to Christianities that collude with power or ignore the material plights of the people. Contextual Bible Study seeks to connect with women's lived realities and to help develop what West calls "incipient theology."⁴⁴⁹ Participants in CBS engage in dialogues as a community on issues like racism, gender-based violence, HIV/AIDS, and economic oppression, with the intent to employ biblical stories to critique patriarchy, racism, classism, homophobia, and violence integrated in social, economic, cultural, and political systems. For example, at an Ujamaa Centre workshop on gender-based violence in 2013, a 38-year-old African Independent Church pastor and single mother from Durban recounted how Contextual Bible Study of the biblical stories of Deborah inspired her to split from her AIC when they refused her ordination due to her sex, at which time she started her own church. She is now the first female AIC pastor to seek theological education and the first AIC pastor to perform a marriage for a homosexual couple.⁴⁵⁰

Some of the main values of Contextual Bible Study – the search for pluralities, the dismissal of dualist constructs, the primacy of community in the development of theologies and activism, and a bottom-up or shared, grassroots flow of power, interpretation, and decision-making – are the same as those most celebrated by RWM members and reflected throughout the

⁴⁴⁹ Interview with Dr. Gerald West, April 18, 2016.

⁴⁵⁰ CHART Workshop, Ujamaa Centre (Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa) May 21, 2013.

history of Christian activism in South Africa. A primary goal of CBS is to identify counternarratives that challenge the predominance of oppressive metanarratives, as well as ambivalence that can be exploited to deconstruct harmful or unjust practices. For example, women may bring up *ukuthwala*, the kidnapping, rape, and forced marriage of young women, as something they feel is problematic but that they must accept as part of South African culture, fearing that their censure of this practice is a denigration of their indigenous tradition. In response, the Ujamaa Centre may bring up the histories of indigenous South African culture that do not include the modern-day construction of *ukuthwala*, thus showing how this practice has evolved into its current violent form. This thus allows participants to see that they can urge their own culture to cease *ukuthwala* by arguing that it is not intrinsic to their tradition. By offering a plurality of voices, practices, and approaches, Contextual Bible Study groups demonstrate that contestation is a part of culture and the Christian faith.

Recognizing that South African women's experiences of apartheid and patriarchy differ from men's, Christian female activists have formed collective identities on the basis of their womanhood, motherhood, South African culture, and Christianity. To this end, they utilized the four unique characteristics of an indigenous liberation theology – that is, communitarianism, grassroots sharing of power, non-dualistic worldviews, and embrace of plurality and ambivalence. More than this, though, they demonstrate that those that seem to be most distanced from the power center and its benefits may be best positioned to lead the charge to critique and deconstruct oppressive and hegemonic aspects of the power center itself. This history of women's activism, combined with the celebration of aspects of traditional culture that empower women, contributes to indigenous women's sense of propriety as Christians – and even as

mothers – to engage in activism and view their struggles as a violation of their rights, their faith's values, and their African culture.

The Rural Women's Movement

Amongst the Christian single mothers affiliated with the Rural Women's Movement, new expressions and understandings of the Christian religion are being produced and embodied that connect with narratives and norms regarded by RWM women as already in place in South African indigenous culture. In my research on the Rural Women's Movement, I sought to discover how Christian single mothers were able to organize and mobilize their experiences and faith to advocate for justice for their particular demographic and which theologies, messages, and practices they embraced as liberating or rejected as oppressive.

In 2013, I became acquainted with the Rural Women's Movement, located in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Over a three-year period, I spent several weeks as a participant-observer in the meetings and daily activities of members of this grassroots movement, engaging with several hundred RWM women in their own communities, and as an interviewer of Christian single mothers within the movement. In my research, I sought to discover how Christian single mothers were able to organize and mobilize their experiences and faith to advocate for justice for their particular demographic and which theologies, messages, and practices they embraced as liberating or rejected as oppressive.

Founder and leader of the Rural Women's Movement, Sizani Ngubane says that her mother used to tell her that she began her work as an African and women's rights activist at age

six. The urge to be part of changing the world was “banging inside her,” she says, as she came to know about the abuse of women and girls at a young age.

“Sometimes I believe in reincarnation,” Ngubane says, “because how, at age six, could I know that the way women are treated and the way black South Africans are treated is wrong?”

Born to a migrant worker father and teenage mother, Ngubane says that her mother used to tell her that the racism, sexism, and poverty she saw around her and experienced was the norm the world over; Ngubane did not believe this and felt that alternatives were possible and present somewhere in the world. After her father had an affair, Ngubane’s mother left him and raised her children on her own in KwaZulu-Natal. Later, Ngubane’s father would take his own life. Rising at three in the morning, Ngubane’s mother would walk to her job as a housekeeper and arrive home after dark each day. Living in a township outside of Pietermaritzburg, Ngubane dropped out of school at fifteen because her mother earned only R80 each month, and Ngubane wanted her mother to stay home with the other children and care for them. Ngubane began working in a shop and earned R150 per month, which she gave to her mother and siblings. All the while, she says, she continued to burn with desire to be part of what changes the world, especially for women.

Ngubane volunteered with the African National Congress as an organizer, teaching ANC supporters how to best avoid raids by apartheid police and militia and secretly recruiting new ANC members. When a job with the ANC opened up, she was told she was a born organizer and was hired immediately at her interview. Ngubane worked for the ANCE for several years until she was hired as a Gender Specialist Fieldworker for an NGO aiming to empower rural South Africans economically. In this position, created after the UN’s Decade for Women, Ngubane found herself to be the “token black female,” in her words, and was constantly challenged by her

coworkers to explain why she only dealt with women when “gender” includes men, too.

Ngubane would reply, “For centuries, we have only dealt with men when we ‘did gender’ or anything else; now we must focus on women to raise them to the same level until we can give them both attention.”

Around this time, Ngubane, by now a single mother of two young activists who had been members of the ANC Youth League, took the lead of the Rural Women’s Movement. RWM began in 1989 and gained strength and momentum in the mid-1990s, though a form of RWM existed prior to this as a network of loosely-affiliated grassroots special-interest organizations and campaigns in the rural regions of KwaZulu-Natal. When Sizani Ngubane became the leader of the Rural Women’s Movement, she founded its current iteration as a non-governmental organization that seeks to unite all rural women across South Africa’s largest province to become a recognizable and prominent voice of advocacy for the rights and betterment of the lives of traditional women. RWM’s predominant concerns are ending gender-based violence, educating traditional women about their rights, securing land rights for traditional women, empowering women’s economic engagement, and increasing access to resources such as education, food security, health care, and clean water. Ngubane describes the essence of RWM as being based on the traditional concept of *ilima*, which in Zulu means “working together.” In the Zulu culture, the community would issue *ilima*, a call to the community to help meet a need, and all who were able would respond because of the communal spirit of *ubuntu*. According to Sizani, when *ilima* was called, houses were built, gardens were tended to, and the children and sick were cared for – and no one expected anything in return. Because all persons in a community were thought to be responsible for one another’s well-being, private ownership of resources was a foreign concept.

When colonialism came, recalls Ngubane, the colonizers encouraged private ownership of land and production. However, in Zulu culture, nobody believed themselves to “own the land” but instead considered it a personified “Mother Earth” who shares her body with them, says Ngubane. With no private party amongst traditional South Africans laying claim to the land in Western terms, white South Africans and colonizers eventually seized all but 13% of South African land.⁴⁵¹ When apartheid ended, the new democratic government set a goal of redistributing 30% of land to its original inhabitants by 2014, but by that year, only 4% had been returned. After the failure of several land redistribution programs, the government slowly began giving land and distribution power to traditional leaders, who had been appointed by the apartheid government. These leaders and South African government have historically failed to recognize women’s ownership of or right to land because rural households are more likely to be female-headed than male-headed, and these authorities do not consider women to be part of a “proper family,” a requirement for land rights, without a male head of household.⁴⁵²

The issue of land is not only one of poverty versus economic prosperity but also one of power. As Shamim Meer writes in “Land Reform and Women’s Land Rights in South Africa,” the control of the land shapes the control of the people and the power relations in South Africa.⁴⁵³ The result is that women are at the mercy of men as to whether or not they have access to land to use for economic or residential means. In 2005, a two-year study of a rural municipality in KwaZulu-Natal, conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council, Associates

⁴⁵¹ Interview with Sizani Ngubane, May 19, 2015.

⁴⁵² Esther W. Dungumaro, “Gender Differentials in Household Structure and Socioeconomic Characteristics in South Africa,” in *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Autumn 2008), 439.

⁴⁵³ Shamim Meer, “Land Reform and Women’s Land Rights in South Africa,” *Perspectives: Political Analysis and Commentary from Africa. Women and Land Rights: Questions of access, Ownership and Control*, (Heinrich Boll Stiftung), 11.

for Development, and the International Center for Research on Women, found that there is a negative relationship between women's property ownership and gender-based violence. Female participants in this study indicated that it was indeed difficult to obtain the rights to land but that property ownership provided them a level of security, independence, and power in their relationships with men. Property ownership allowed them a place to escape from abusive cohabitation, and it also increased women's proclivity to refuse the demands of male intimate partners or relatives.⁴⁵⁴ Corroborating this research, Margaret Chitiga-Mabugu indicates that there is a "close link between women's empowerment, development of their capabilities, and their economic self-sufficiency," in which a lack of income also limits women's choices.⁴⁵⁵ In fact, Chitiga-Mabugu indicates that in KwaZulu-Natal, female heads of household have greater access to and authority over assets and resources and have greater movement flexibility to engage in diverse activities than women in male-headed houses. Their vulnerability to poverty and to gender-based violence is exacerbated when women in rural households lack access to an asset and resource base.⁴⁵⁶

Thus, as Sizani Ngubane began to form the Rural Women's Movement, securing women's rights to land became the primary focus of the grassroots movement, for in land rights lay a key to food security, decreased gender-based violence, increased economic opportunity for women, and a reclamation of the dignity of women and of native South African culture. In the early 1990s, people were dying of AIDS-related illnesses in huge numbers. Widows were being

⁴⁵⁴ Human Sciences Research Council, Associates for Development, and International Center for Research on Women, *Women's Property Rights, HIV and AIDS, and Domestic Violence: Research Findings from Two Districts in South Africa and Uganda*, (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2008).

⁴⁵⁵ Margaret Chitiga-Mabugu, et al. *South African Women as Champions of Change: A Civil Society Programme of Action for the African Women's Decade*, (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2014), 67.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 4.

evicted from their ancestral homes, and male community members assumed these women were responsible for transmitting HIV/AIDS, as well as losing their homes and land. The disparate projects that comprised the existing Rural Women's Movement did not know about each other, so Ngubane began her leadership by conducting a survey of rural women that asked how they would feel about a group that represented indigenous, oppressed women's voices. Receiving clearly positive responses, Ngubane determined that RWM needed to unite under a communication network in which the women and communities could share information and learn from one another. Using this model of widespread communal unity in which women became bonded across municipalities due to their membership in RWM and through learning from one another and about the similarities in their shared experiences, Ngubane was able to help RWM members develop a collective identity and mobilize for collective action. The Rural Women's Movement has achieved renown for its part in overturning the Communal Land Rights Act of 2004, which stipulated that traditional authorities had power over land administration and allocation.⁴⁵⁷ RWM was responsible for training thousands of women on their rights to land, and they successfully demonstrated against this bill and presented their cases in Parliament, holding that this bill violated the Constitution's requirement that historically oppressed groups, such as women, have greatest claim to land rights. Furthermore, they argued that this bill openly discriminated against women on the basis of their marital status, as well as their sex.⁴⁵⁸ In 2010, the Communal Land Rights Act was withdrawn. In 2012, RWM began another fight with the South African government over the passage of the Traditional Courts Bill, which granted senior

⁴⁵⁷ Shamim Meer, "Land Reform and Women's Land Rights in South Africa," 13.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 13.

traditional leaders greater power than they customarily would hold in South African culture.⁴⁵⁹

The bill was successfully overturned, though it has recently been resurrected for debate in Parliament.

Additionally, RWM works to eliminate gender-based violence by connecting women's land rights, human rights, and reclamation of non-patriarchal cultural values and by empowering women to formulate their own solutions. In 2010, a church pastor in eMangweni, of the uThukela District, known as a violent area, called Ngubane to help address the issue of *ukuthwala*. In South Africa, the police have been uncertain as to whether they could open cases concerning *ukuthwala*, since the South African Constitution grants special recognition of and protection to native culture; the assumption is that this patriarchal and violent practice is part of traditional South African culture. However, RWM holds that no customary law can override primary national law, that the Bill of Rights of the Constitution recognizes gender equality, and that culture inevitably changes, so that patriarchal practices can be rejected while other aspects of the culture can still be celebrated.⁴⁶⁰ With this lens, Ngubane went to the community to create dialogue and space for the community to identify problems and formulate their own solutions. She ran a workshop for 80 female home-based caregivers and two male caregivers on women's human rights, hoping the issue of *ukuthwala* would come up on its own, but after one month, the stigma surrounding rape kept participants silent. However, when Ngubane shared about her own experiences with gender-based violence, one woman broke the silence and recounted the story of how, at 15 years of age, she was abducted by three men and kept on a mountain for several days until she agreed to marry her captor. From this moment on, every workshop attendee admitted to either knowing a victim of *ukuthwala* or experiencing it themselves. They then began a program

⁴⁵⁹ Interview with Sizani Ngubane, April 14, 2016.

⁴⁶⁰ Interview with Sizani Ngubane, April 14, 2016.

to educate their community about their Constitutional rights, South African customary law, and women's human rights. Out of the workshop grew youth classes to educate younger community members about gender justice and human rights, and the youth created co-ed citizens' patrol teams to safeguard the wellbeing of young women in the community. Due to RWM's efforts, this municipality held a Five-Year Celebration in 2015 marking half a decade with no known cases of *ukuthwala*.

In my research on the Rural Women's Movement, I sought to discern how Christian single mothers' experiences and faith served as a frame to garner their membership in a social movement for their rights and to discover which ideas and practices they embraced as liberating or rejected as oppressive. By identifying how unmarried mothers in RWM have interpreted their Christianity, we might ascertain how religion can create alternative cultures and ideologies that are effectively critical of and oppositional to dominant, patriarchal, and hegemonic systems.

To perform this research, I contacted Sizani Ngubane, founder and leader of the Rural Women's Movement, who invited me to travel with her to various RWM meetings, community visits, and other events and who also recruited for me RWM members who she knew to be active Christians and single mothers. Additionally, she provided translation and interpretation services to bridge the language differences for some interviewees who spoke primarily Zulu. All interview participants were provided with release forms in their own language, and these release forms were read to them orally in Zulu. In my data collection and coding, I include both interviews with RWM members and with Sizani Ngubane, as well as community meetings, visits and events in which I was invited to participate and was introduced as a friend of Ngubane's and American activist and researcher of women's activism, unmarried motherhood, and Christianity. Because, as Kathy Charmaz writes, it "provides tools for studying power and inequality," I

employed Constructivist Grounded Theory as my methodology for analyzing and evaluating data. I begin with qualitative critical inquiry – specifically, a postcolonial feminist critical lens – and employ reflexivity and methodological self-consciousness, seeking to be aware of my own social location, privileges, and influence on both interview and research participants and on the research process itself. This approach allowed me to realize and be receptive to the information presented both by Sizani Ngubane and the research process itself that brought to my attention the individualism latent in my research methods, which cut against the values and practices of communitarianism of RWM women. Therefore, most of my interviews were conducted as focus groups, with Sizani Ngubane mediating as a familiar, safe, and comforting presence for participants. With Constructivist Grounded Theory, I took a pragmatist approach that views “reality” as fluid and embraces the interview and research process as a meaning-making and reality-constructing process.⁴⁶¹ The interactions of the women, my engagements with the women, and the responses, discussions, and demonstrations elicited by these activities created realities and meanings.

I began my research process with the question: What messages are unmarried Christian mothers receiving in South Africa, and how are they interpreted by these women? After encountering the Rural Women’s Movement, my question became: How are unmarried Christian mothers in South Africa able to organize for progressive collective action for their rights? Using Constructivist Grounded Theory, I discerned the significance of certain traits, values, and practices to RWM women, which figured prominently in their celebrations, interactions, meetings, events, and telling of their stories. Sizani Ngubane corroborated my discernment of the values of communitarianism, grassroots, shared, or bottom-up power, unity and non-dualism of the

⁴⁶¹ Kathy Charmaz, “The Power of Constructivist Grounded Theory for Critical Inquiry,” *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 23, (2017), accessed February 20, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800416657105>

spiritual and material, and a high tolerance for plurality, ambivalence, and dissonance. In comparative analysis, these four traits did not feature as prominently in the discourse and stories of Christian single mothers in the United States.

In my observations, RWM women indicate that communitarianism rather than private ownership, self-interest, or atomized family structures is vital to their theologies and South African culture. In one interview, an RWM member was born on the land of her parents and grandparents but was a young child when white farmers invaded. According to this woman, the law at the time stated that if an indigenous person had been born on the land or lived there for five or more years, they could not be evicted, but aggressive farmers wanted to convert the land to a privately-owned commercial farm. She was forced to start working at age six to “pay” for the use of the land, now formally owned by these farmers, who used her family as slaves. The sale of her family’s land to another farmer resulted in the new owner “carving Mother Earth” into private plots, and her family became part of this farmer’s estate. She was taken from her family to work at this man’s house in Durban. Another change of ownership left this woman and her family at the mercy of an especially abusive farmer who attempted to evict them by force. When her family refused to leave, the farmer destroyed their house, took their furniture, and killed her mother and brother. When she called the police, they responded that she and her family should have gotten off the man’s land when he asked.

At this time, the interview participant was raising three children, born from relationships with men who never stuck around to help support the family. One of her children ran to the community in which the interview took place and told their story to a church group started by another RWM member, also a single mother. This woman asked other church leaders to pray about how they could help. They decided that they must instruct the surviving woman to leave

her home, but in order to do so, they must provide a place for her to live. The provision of a home was crucial to mobilizing the woman to leave her land. Initially, she refused to leave because she valued her familial and communal ties to the land. However, the promise of a new place to call home meant not only safety but the continuation of life, she says. The church was able to locate a home for her to rent, and while the woman says that it is very hard to make ends meet, her neighbors buy food for her children and pay her for odd jobs, so they have never gone hungry.⁴⁶²

Another RWM member, in her final year of nursing school, reveals her communitarian spirit when speaking about how she was able to mobilize for economic empowerment as a young single mother. Although her community accepted her pregnancy and her child, this young woman still struggled with shame for giving birth out of wedlock. She tearfully told us about how she sat down and thought about how she could prove herself trustworthy to her community, who, prior to her pregnancy, had spoken openly about premarital sex as sinful and disgraceful. Although they did not appear to treat her in particular with shame or censure, she had internalized these messages and felt them to reveal her community's true feelings about women like her. Therefore, since she had no money to return to college, she decided to establish a creche to look after children so that other women could attend school or work. Rather than accepting money for her childcare, she labored for free as a way of apologizing to her community.

Pastors from the community church came to visit the creche and decided to support her work by providing her with a social worker to assist and with chairs and toys. In addition, they taught her how to operate a computer so that she could earn money. In 2013, this woman heard about Sizani Ngubane and her economic empowerment of women and agricultural work. RWM

⁴⁶² Interview conducted in April, 2016.

sent her to the Midlands Agricultural College, where she trained in organic farming and business skills. She says, “When I came back, I did not sit back. I practiced all that I learned.” She began getting up early to garden and sold her food to people in her community, even purchasing a small store. However, instead of keeping her profits to herself, she used some food to feed orphan children in her area. She then bought meat to sell door-to-door and later cigarettes and airtime for cell phones. By this time, she had earned enough money to register for college in Durban, and her brother promised to care for her store and garden if she went to school and earned her degree.

She spoke extensively about her passion for attending to and curing the needs of her community. She feels as though her community is not always united and asks herself what she can do to eliminate disagreements. One of her ideas is to use children to unite the older community members. She desires to use her work as a nurse and her earnings to build a place for children to play together because, she states, “if the children can be united, the older people will follow.” She wants to be “family” to as many people in her community as she can, she says, because “family is not about biological or nuclear but are those who support you and don’t judge you when you face struggles or difficulties.”⁴⁶³

In yet another example of the communitarian spirit embraced by RWM women, I was taken in 2016 to the home of a woman whom I had met in 2013 and who remembered me from that visit. She welcomed me to her home, pulling chairs from inside her house so we could sit with her on her front porch and enjoy the corn that she was preparing for dinner. Looking out on her parched, drought-starved garden, the generosity she showed in sharing her precious corn demonstrated not only her personal kindness but the strong value of hospitality amongst these women. In 2011, this woman, a home-based caregiver, had called Sizani Ngubane because six of

⁴⁶³ Interview conducted in April, 2016.

her friends had died. These women had all been HIV-positive and did not have access to much food, so they quit taking their anti-retroviral medications.⁴⁶⁴ Ngubane talked to an American friend at the UN Women's Conference in New York, who then organized two graduates of the New School to work in five South African districts. In these districts, most people only ate once a day, and some families were completely dependent for their survival on neighbors inviting them to share meals. After learning permaculture from these New School trainers, Ngubane conducted a workshop for home-based caregivers in a community in which 100 women had lost their lives due to malnutrition and food-related issues, training other women in this community in organic farming. She then selected women to go into homes where sick adults were not able to care for their families and start gardens in proximity to these households. Now, young women volunteers go to donated gardens given by elderly women in each community in RWM's jurisdiction to learn from older RWM women and grow food for their families or to sell. The older caregivers in these communities have willingly given their land and gardens, previously used for their own clients, to help their communities survive and become empowered. I had the privilege of working alongside these women in three gardens and witnessed the intergenerational education that takes place in these spaces, the vast amount of knowledge these women have and transfer, and the shared work and mutual care in which these women engage. Between 2011 and 2013, after the establishment of these community gardens, no lives were lost due to malnutrition or food insecurity. In 2014, a 28-year-old mother lost her life when the community garden suffered after a harsh winter, and the woman did not tell her caregivers that this garden was her only source of food. Though it would seem that losing only one woman in the past six years is a triumph, Nguabe proclaims that she is "not celebrating the decrease of deaths because one person

⁴⁶⁴ Taking ARVs on an empty stomach can cause severe sickness.

to many died of starvation in a country that is not so poor.” Instead, Ngubane exclaims that the poor distribution of wealth, food, and power is killing her communities and women, and they are fighting this with their communal distributions of the same.⁴⁶⁵

The valuing of a communitarian spirit was mentioned in the women’s storytelling and interviews 239 times and included statements about how RWM institutes democratic decision-making and planning, mentions of *ilima* or *ubuntu*, examples of RWM providing support during struggles, the inclusiveness of RWM, negative speech about the privatization of land and families, and theological statements about communitarianism. (See **Figure 1**) For example, one interview subject proclaimed her belief that “if you see people in pain, you must take that pain as your own.”⁴⁶⁶ Another young woman, reflecting upon her own experience as a single mother, stated that one thing she desires to change for other young mothers is for the community, families, and the Christian Church to accept and nurture mothers and their babies, while a third single mother called for new theologies that would promote this nurturing of female-headed households, saying of dominant theologies that vilify single motherhood that “the way people preach isolates me.”⁴⁶⁷ Still other interview subjects spoke of their definitions of family as being fictive kin in community living together and loving one another. One 32-year-old woman, who was in the process of starting a sewing co-op for single mothers in her municipality, considered her community her family, since they supported her business endeavors and looked at all the children of the community as their own.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁵ Interview with Sizani Ngubane, conducted in May, 2015.

⁴⁶⁶ Interview conducted in May, 2015.

⁴⁶⁷ Interviews conducted in April, 2016.

⁴⁶⁸ Interview conducted in May, 2015.

COMMUNITARIAN SPIRIT			
Indicator	# of Times Mentioned	Indicator	# of Times Mentioned
RWM as Democratic	14	Formation of Cooperative Economic Organizations	12
Negative Speech about Privatization (of Land, Families, Capital, etc.)	29	RWM Support During Struggles	36
RWM as Inclusive	20	Community Providing Support During Struggles	21
Ilima or Ubuntu	44	Forming Action/Groups to Address Social Issues	17
Home-Based Caregiving	7	Theological Statements about Communitarianism	23
RWM as Space for Learning from Each Other	16		

Figure 1 *Number of times members of the Rural Women's Movement made statements indicating their valuing of a communitarian spirit*

Communitarianism amongst these women does not mean that they do not possess their own property. Instead, property ownership, land rights, and economic empowerment are essential to their fight against gender-based violence, their push for recognition and representation in laws and policy, their campaign for indigenous rights, their survival, and their self-actualization. The possession of property provides a safe space for these women to escape from abuse, offers bargaining power, and gives them greater voice in traditional, municipal, and national governments. It also offers these women the means to economic empowerment, whether through agriculture, using it as a space for childcare, establishing workshops or stores, or hosting meetings and trainings for RWM initiatives. As seen in the aforementioned stories, land rights and property ownership were essential to being able to have a communitarian spirit and thus develop a collective identity as women activists for gender justice. Using property to build one another up has been a major source of empowerment and even rescue for abused women, as seen

in the story of the church leader who found a home for the woman escaping abuse. As Joerg Rieger notes, striving to end patriarchy only works if one is not completely dependent on patriarchy, as seen amongst RWM women.⁴⁶⁹

The link between communitarianism and property ownership is that the property RWM women own – homes, food, land, money, businesses, knowledge, etc. – may officially be privately owned by certain women but are treated as the community's. The woman may employ or exploit their private ownership for their empowerment, but they do not seek their own good. The ethics they formulate and embody is that there must be a tangible, significant good produced for their community by their ownership of property. On the other hand, they treat their property not as something to possess or hold onto but as something to give away to others. Thus, while money, land, and goods are certainly tools for their survival, the *possession* of property is actually viewed and used as political; they are a means to asserting their voices, ending injustice, and seeking empowerment and elevation of their community, of which they are one part. Otherwise, such property is purposed for the communal good. As Ngubane says, “*Ubuntu* is what the interviewees talk about: family is those who listen and assist you to come out of challenges. *Ubuntu* is feeling pain when another is feeling pain and assisting one another.” While RWM women embody the spirit of *ubuntu* in their compassion towards one another and nonjudgment of the unmarried mothers in their midst, *ubuntu* is a tangible action amongst them, one that often involved – even necessitates a new ethics of property ownership and form of economic power. What they present – a sort of cooperative ownership of property in which each

⁴⁶⁹ Interview conducted in February, 2018.

woman has her own share to rely on for empowerment – offers a practical counternarrative to neoliberal capitalism and privatization.

In addition to valuing communitarianism over privatization or individualism, RWM members expressed their desire for a grassroots or bottom-up flow of power, in contrast to top-down or centralized power schemes. Sizani Ngubane tells the story of how in 1998 she held a workshop for the wives of tribal chiefs and traditional councilmen. Afterward, an attendee thanked Ngubane for teaching her that she has rights. Prior to this, she said, she had seen herself as a “thing” meant to clean and care for her children. Ngubane was shocked because she always thought these women were in better positions than the rest of the RWM women since they were married to chiefs. Instead, the wives were seen as strangers in their marital homes, never given a sense of “home” and rights for themselves since they were purchased with *ilobolo*. What this means is that the wives of the chiefs were objectified in the same manner as other traditional women, and because they were considered “objects”, they could not have rights to property or to equality. Therefore, Ngubane realized two key points. First, it would become essential to the mission of RWM to connect women from different social standings in the rural areas to one another because they suffered the same objectification and deprivation of rights. Thus, creating a grassroots community of solidarity across apparent differences, a solidarity akin to Rieger’s concept of deep solidarity, would be vital. Second, empowering women as subjects and agents to contest and deconstruct their objectification must entail awakening the women’s understanding that they have rights to property. Their assertion of these rights and their participation in the

economy and property ownership is a radical assertion of their subjectivity, contra their systemic objectification.

These two principles have informed Ngubane's recognition of silenced voices and her work to include these voices, creating deep solidarity across apparent gender, class, and age differences. In such a way, she has created in RWM a grassroots flow of power that allows for the combination of both intersectionality, by which the differing social locations of participants', due to their specific matrix of identities, is voiced, heard, and acted upon, and deep solidarity, by which members recognize their common victimization by the flows of power and systems of oppression in place and can join together to fight these. For example, Ngubane recognized that women were not part of the process of making decisions about the return of land to traditional South Africans, which was mediated by the Farm Workers Group. According to the South African Constitution, this group must include youth and women, but women were thought to know nothing about land issues because they were perceived by the men in power as staying home all day and "doing nothing." Ngubane held a meeting in a community to deconstruct this myth and demonstrate the ability of women to participate in the necessity of their participation. She arrived at the community an hour early to mingle because she did not have a plan for the meeting; instead, she wanted to have an open mind and let the meeting plan itself, allowing the voices of the participants to create the agenda. Twenty women arrived and sat ten meters away from the men and did not participate in the discussion. Ngubane went and sat with them. She noticed the women constructed a hierarchy dependent on age and would only speak through the oldest wife. Then, this wife would only speak through her to the men because these women were not permitted to speak in front of certain men. Ngubane began the discussion by asking these women, "What do we do from the time we get up in the morning until we go to sleep?",

intentionally using the first-person plural to show solidarity with them. She wanted them to see for themselves that they are not lazy. They realized, in their response, that they are the first to wake up and the last to sleep, getting about three to four hours of rest each night. She asked men the same question, and they realized in their responses that they ask the women in their families to do chores for them, that they work fewer hours than the women, and that, unlike the women, they get a lunch break in the middle of the day. By allowing the conversation to flow naturally through this community gathering instead of foisting upon them her agenda as leader, Ngubane was able to facilitate the community's realization that the women were overworked and that their failure to be included in decisions about land, given that they were the ones to work the land the most, was detrimental to traditional peoples. Furthermore, the community became more dedicated to communitarianism, as the men made pledges to take on some of the tasks the women were performing so that these women could have time "to empower themselves and go to RWM."

Additionally, the value of a bottom-up or grassroots flow of power is seen in the resourcefulness of the single mothers interviewed for this project. Rather than waiting for economic development to reach their municipalities or for laws to change to better represent them and give them equal access to the means to thrive, many of these women have believed in RWM's messages of the power of women and found ways to counter patriarchy. One of the main means of doing so is to seek economic empowerment on their own terms through attending the many trainings RWM conducts or creating their own projects. Access to their own wealth,

however modest, is a key to women's empowerment, independence from patriarchy, and ability to assert alternatives to patriarchal structures in religion, economics, society, and politics.⁴⁷⁰

One 19-year-old single mother whom I met while we were working together in her community's garden is an example of a woman whose personal sense of power has contributed to the empowerment of other women in her community, all due to her discovery of her own agency. She became pregnant at age seventeen and dropped out of high school because there was no one to watch her child. A member of the local Apostolic church, this woman ceased attending because she felt she did not fit in due to the stigma surrounding unplanned pregnancy. At this point, she became part of RWM, a space in which she was allowed to learn from her elders, many of whom were single mothers like herself, which she said helped her "grow to esteem herself." Her church's leader visited her to ask why she had stopped coming to church and told her that being pregnant was not an issue for the church. Through the treatment of RWM, she says, "When I think about what God thinks of me, God sees me as one of his [*sic*] kids." She still believes that God wants women to wait until they are older or married to have children, though she says that she believes this is because it is a good thing to have one's own home and establish oneself before having children. Thus, her theology for single motherhood is distinctly tied to her belief that God desires for women to be empowered and have access to the means to thrive so that they can raise their children likewise. Because she believes now that God embraces her as she is, she has thrown herself back into church, leading singing, cleaning her church, and participating in the youth group's sports. While she used to ask her child's father to be involved in their lives, she has since stopped. Instead, she is saving money to go back to school and dreams of being a nurse, having her own home, and caring for her child in her own home. She

⁴⁷⁰ Estelle B. Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*, 146, 155.

wants to be a nurse because she likes helping others. As she says, “When I see someone hurting, it hurts me too, and I want to help.” Her involvement in RWM has led her to take steps to help other women learn, whether that is about God’s love for them or about community farming, and she feels she has the skills, thanks to RWM to start a business and support herself.

Also espousing the value of grassroots, bottom-up power, one young woman at a large community meeting in a municipality once known for its gender-based violence before the arrival of RWM spoke of how, as a land owner, she was able to be a member of a traditional council that included men who do not respect women. She says that male councilors are not abiding by the traditional law or code but are trying to please chiefs. The chiefs in turn are not speaking up and challenging injustice. Instead, says the woman, the poor are charged for crimes, but murderers are given good lives because everyone is afraid to bring them to justice. One man attacked this woman for being a part of the traditional council and bit off her finger. She was then threatened and fined R3000 for hitting the man while he went free. At this point, RWM intervened and took her to Parliament in Cape Town to speak to them about her experience being a member of a traditional council. In this moment, through the empowerment of RWM, she says that she reclaimed her dignity, and the chief and abusive man saw her on television and no longer abuse her. She exclaimed, “All of us, as creatures of the Creator, have dignity, and RWM helped me reclaim this!”

She went on to say that RWM must make members stronger, shouting, “Let us not be scared! Let us protect Sizani by being even stronger! If anything happens to Sizani, we will continue because they cannot stop all of us! RWM is here to stay! They helped me get R1200 for

the sick to save their lives and taught me to use medicinal plants and to eat prickly-pear for my knee pain.”

This woman’s story is a reflection of the grassroots flow of power valued by RWM, not only in its methodology but also in its ideology. Part and parcel of this is its recognition of the detriment of authoritarian, top-down flows of power, which they identify in patriarchal systems such as the traditional councils, male-dominated societies, and white-controlled economics. While not a religious organization, RWM has significant impact on members’ religiosity and theology in several ways. For one, their empowerment of single mothers economically and over and against patriarchy creates an ideological dissonance within the women, leading many of them to reject the judgmentalism of their communities and churches for unwed pregnancy. These women often construct new ideas of God or new theologies that allow them to view themselves as loved by the Divine. Other women, who hold authoritarian notions of God and believe that God does judge them for their pregnancy, often display anger towards this God, mixed with shame that they seem to be processing. A third way that RWM impacts the religiosity of its members is by helping single mothers accept and love themselves, which, in some cases, leads them to reconcile with those churches that seem to be least judgmental or perhaps even accepting of unwed pregnancy. In each case, the power of the grassroots in tangible forms (in this case, women’s economic and political empowerment) leads to new theologies for single mothers that echo an ethics of love, community, and grassroots power. Notably, though, this bottom-up flow of power in which individual women are empowered is far different from neoliberal

individualism and privatization in that RWM attends to the individual woman to empower her to help her community, and each woman is dealt with equally.

This value of grassroots power was mentioned 228 times by RWM members and included negative speech about patriarchy, white sovereignty, apartheid, or contemporary ruling bodies in civil society and government, positive theological statements about women's or single mothers' power, and general or specific statements about RWM's power and empowerment of women to meet needs. (See **Figure 2**)

One single mother at the 2013 community meeting exclaimed, "RWM is a powerful organization and known all over the world because of the work we are doing on the ground. Our hands are not in our pockets." Another shared a story of triumphing over a male attacker, stating that she has "power within [her] now to where [her] abuser no longer bothers [her]." A third woman at the same meeting urged funders to continue to support RWM "because it allows [the women] to meet and share personal experiences. Then, solutions are coming from the women themselves."⁴⁷¹ In the course of my interviews, similar statements were made by the participants. A young single mother in the final months of nursing school said, "In my struggle, I have told other people that we *can* be on our own as women. Messages about how women are weak compared to men are old and outdated. We are just as powerful as men! We don't need men!"⁴⁷² Sizani Ngubane, herself a single mother, describes RWM's goal as being the empowerment of women through ensuring they are part of the group influencing policy formation. As she says, "We try to make our voices heard and hope the government takes us seriously. If not, we will

⁴⁷¹ Community meeting, Rural Women's Movement, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, May 20, 2013.

⁴⁷² Interview conducted in April, 2016.

take the government to the Constitutional Court.”⁴⁷³ These statements signify a drive to deconstruct top-down, patriarchal power regimes through women’s mutual economic and social empowerment and grassroots influencing of policy, custom, theology, and community.

GRASSROOTS/BOTTOM-UP FLOW OF POWER			
Indicator	# of Times Mentioned	Indicator	# of Times Mentioned
Negative Speech about Patriarchy	29	RWM as Democratic	14
Negative Speech about Apartheid/White Supremacy	16	Theological Statements about Women’s Power	20
Negative Speech Authorities (Church, Police, Government, Traditional Council, Etc.)	38	General Statements about RWM’s/Women’s Power	26
RWM Empowering Women’s Political Involvement	16	RWM Empowering Women to Meet Their Needs (e.g. End Abuse, Economic Empowerment, Health, Education, etc.)	38
RWM Empowering the Formation of Community Groups/Activism	20	RWM Embracing Indigenous Culture	11

Figure 2 *Number of times members of the Rural Women’s Movement made statements indicating their valuing of a grassroots or bottom-up flow of power*

In addition to the values of communitarianism and a grassroots, shared flow of power, as opposed to top-down power as domination, Christian single mothers within RWM also revealed a third central and significant value: that the world is non-dualistic in that the spiritual and material are inseparable and mutually constituting. To use Rhys Williams theory, RWM women’s religion functions as ideology in the sense that it shapes their beliefs about the world order, which then allow them to identify realities that contradict what they believe to be the intended world order. Therefore, what happens in the empirical world and in their lived

⁴⁷³ Interview conducted on April 17, 2016.

experience is innately spiritual, so that they interpret their material struggles as symptomatic of a broken spirituality in this world; because of their communitarian values, they rarely voiced a sense of personal or individual failure as the cause of their struggles. Rather, the “problems” were interpreted as spiritual warfare operating through broken systems on this earth. As ideology, their religion not only allowed RWM women to diagnose the suffering and struggles they endured as simultaneously material, spiritual, and systemic, but also invited them to imagine the world the Divine intended and pursue the creation of that world as their Christian duty. Additionally, RWM members’ religion functions as ideology in that they believe that ambivalence and ambiguity are primary and acceptable features of this world and the Christian faith. Thus, arguments for a single correct interpretation or way of being Christian may be seen as a foreign concept or even a harmful idea. This belief in the allowance of disagreement and contention in biblical and theological interpretation allows RWM the agency to contradict and challenge dominant theologies that they feel are harmful while also providing space for each of them to interpret their own experiences or express their own views, whether or not they agree with one another, without feeling the need to establish a single dominant or correct viewpoint. It appears that the litmus test for whether or not RWM deem a theology wrong and worthy of outright dismissal rather than simply disagreeing with it is whether or not the theology rises from the contexts in which and people with whom they are living and provides lifegiving empowerment to the women themselves. In such a way, the holism of theology and of life as simultaneously and inseparably both material and spiritual forms a sort of bedrock for the

contextual formation of multiple liberating theologies that challenge monolithic ideologies produced by those outside the rural South African community.

In my interviews, a non-dualistic worldview of the oneness of the material and spiritual was articulated or implied 77 times. (See **Figure 3**) These include stories of physical health or financial provision that were told as examples of divine favor or presence, the equation of RWM with God's salvific work or with a general transformative power, the involvement of religious rituals or figures with RWM, examples of churches attending to material needs or, alternatively, of RWM taking a supportive role when the church fails to do so, and statements alluding to the spiritual nature of physical objects or practices. For example, one RWM leader at the community meeting proclaimed, "When I sing about Jesus lifting me up, I am singing about how RWM lifted me up. They taught me projects to supplement my pension, and I feel power in my body because I know, as a woman, I have rights."⁴⁷⁴

One middle-aged woman who participated in an interview works as a home-based caregiver and also gives her time to her community's creche, even though she herself is HIV-positive. This RWM member was the first woman to tell her story of sexual violence at an *ukuthwala* workshop in Loskop that Sizani Ngubane conducted. The woman's bravery to share her experience and name the problem in the community set off a wildfire of testimony-sharing amongst the hundreds of participants in the workshop who had either survived similar attacks or had known someone in their community who had. This spurred additional meetings and workshops at which Ngubane empowered participants to dig into the root problems fueling *ukuthwala*, which the attendees named as patriarchal economic and political disenfranchisement of rural women. RWM then trained women on their constitutional and traditional rights, helping

⁴⁷⁴ Community meeting, Rural Women's Movement, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, May 20, 2013.

them to see that their oppression was not “just the way things are” or some inevitability. Finally, participants began to construct their own solutions to the problem. By empowering women to break with dependency on oppressive men by forming a grassroots network of support, the establishment of a local chapter of RWM was key to ending *ukuthwala* in this community. RWM provided a cooperative economic and social network independent of the patriarchal system, allowed women protection and encouragement when they raised their voices publicly against oppressive practices, and began training young men to recognize that patriarchal practices such as *ukuthwala* were symptomatic of the influence of dominant and violent colonialism and the wounds it left not only on rural women but on rural men, as well. The community decided to form a co-ed community surveillance and civilian police force to keep their women safe, and these efforts have been successful in creating a peaceful community.

The woman who started these actions with her story is the mother of nine who was abducted and raped at the age of fifteen. When her family found out about her pregnancy, they slaughtered a cow as a cleansing ceremony for her peers because she was seen to be a corrupting force for her “sin” of premarital pregnancy. However, she was not permitted to eat the cow and thus be cleansed herself. Instead, she was forced to marry her captor, who became HIV-positive due to his continued sexual exploits, and infected his wife. The culture in which this woman grew up, which believed in a spiritual dimension to every material or physical phenomenon, targeted the RWM woman for blame, since she endured the material burdens of becoming pregnant before marriage and being HIV-positive. Yet, through the empowering influence of the Rural Women’s Movement, she has been able to reinterpret her experiences using the same lens of the non-dualistic connection between the physical and spiritual and thus developed a potent theology that has impacted her church as well. When RWM came to the community and

empowered women to talk about the negative impact of *ukuthwala*, the community – and in particular, this woman – saw the positive results in the cessation of the abduction of schoolchildren, which she, like many others, read as a sign of divine power in RWM. At this point, the woman did not attend church, but her teenage son joined a Zionist church. This woman began attending with her son, believing for the first time that God could love her because God sent RWM to stop the atrocities that had victimized her as a teenager. She wanted to go to church because she felt she was worthy of good health, despite the narrative that told her that she was guilty and sinful for being HIV-positive and for becoming pregnant out of wedlock, and she wanted to be in a place of healing. As she says, she “puts [her] health in the Creator’s hands daily.” Additionally, she publicly refused to take ARVs for her HIV. Her partner died of AIDS, and the church saw her continued health and thriving and deemed her a holy person. She believes that her health is a testimony to God’s love for her, and when she goes to church, she “feels light” and “can feel healing” in her. She believes that her kindness towards others, her following of health guidelines, and her acceptance of her situation has contributed to her physical health, as well, and she says she is “proud of her Creator because all other women who tested positive at the same time are gone.” She has encouraged her church and her own family to echo RWM’s ethics and culture of openness and solidarity with one another through struggles as a new theological principle, exclaiming that her motto is that “there should be no shame with anyone.” She is known to purchase condoms for her children and take them frequently to the medical clinic rather than to the traditional healer and to tell them to talk to her about their sexual lives so that they can deal with their struggles together. Her story testifies to the oneness of physicality and spirituality that is endemic to South African culture and iterations of Christianity and that are primary features of RWM women’s theologies of empowerment. Their ability to link their

thriving or success with divine favor flips the script on theologies that have explained their oppression as divinely ordained or as their just desserts for apparent sins – in particular, as it relates to their sexuality or single motherhood.

Also displaying a firm belief in the unity of the spiritual and material – and the infusion of spirituality in the quotidian and mundane, another home-based caregiver in the same community of Loskop spoke about how she disappointed her devout Zionist parents by becoming pregnant before the age of twenty-five. According to this woman, extramarital pregnancy after the age of twenty-five is not considered as disgraceful, perhaps due to the status granted by motherhood or because of the chance that later pregnancy offers to women to receive their education and establish themselves economically and in a community. This woman became pregnant as a result of a rape, and her rapist refused to marry her. However, the man would come to her house regularly to abuse her. At this time, the woman met RWM and Sizani Ngubane, whom she says taught her “to be on her own feet” economically and encouraged her to report the abuse to the police. She says that she did not know that she could do this and is thankful to the Rural Women’s Movement for teaching her and supporting her. Her community, influenced by RWM’s presence and the culture of openness and solidarity it had developed, stood behind this woman and told her that it would pressure the police to lock her abuser up. To this woman’s surprise her most vocal supporters were actually men! When asked why she thought this was, she said that RWM has helped men to see that what rapists and abductors like her children’s father do is not acceptable *or* cultural, so they support her. She has found her church, rooted in this very community, to be very supportive of her and other single mothers. Recently, her church held a conference at which they screened a “Jesus film” depicted Christ’s torture and crucifixion. This interviewee expressed that she was particularly inspired by how Jesus says, “I forgive you,” after

all of his hardships. She says that she has put herself in Christ's shoes, relating his plight to her own, and forgives her abuser by taking off the load of pain she has carried and giving it to God. She says that this action has changed her life.

What this woman's story appears to depict is a theology for single mothers that identifies similarities between single mothers and Christ through their struggles and hardships, as well as through their responses to these struggles – namely, retaining the ability to love and be loved, asserting the power and agency to forgive those who seek to dominate them, supporting others, and speaking out against oppression and evil. This presents a counternarrative to theologies of shame for premarital pregnancy and women's independent parenting, and by creating an elision between Christ and the single mother, this countertheology functions to liberate the woman from feelings of shame, thus giving her the “permission” to resist oppression, continued victimization, and struggles foisted on her as “consequences” of a supposed sin she committed. Furthermore, they read their continued survival as a testimony to the support of God for them, which often contradicts messages of shame they may hear or feel. According to this particular woman's theology, the focus is not necessarily on Jesus' victimization itself but is at least equally also on Jesus' move to forgive his murderers. This is interpreted as an assertion of power over the murderers and is subversive because Christ was understood by his context to be under the authority and domination of those who killed him. Likewise, the move on this woman's behalf to forgive her rapist is not an effort to release him from debt or guilt but rather a demonstration of her power and agency over and against someone who utilized domination to dehumanize and harm her and is thus also a subversive act that reverses the ostensible flow of power. She believes herself to hold a privileged status with God, along with all other women and men in her community and church – as well as those in RWM – who embrace the ethics of “never turning

their backs on another.” She says, “When I ask my Creator for anything, He *[sic]* provides. He *[sic]* sent RWM. RWM has helped me become assertive and to discover that we are free as rural women.” Something of an RWM evangelist, this woman tells other women about her membership in the movement and encourages others “to go be a part of it if they want to change their lives.” She believes that the support she has received from other women through RWM has changed her views on herself, on God, and on her worth and capabilities.

NON-DUALISTIC WORLDVIEW			
Indicator	# of Times Mentioned	Indicator	# of Times Mentioned
Physical Health as a Sign of Divine Favor/Presence	5	RWM as Holding Transformative Power	16
Financial Provision/General Well-Being as a Sign of Divine Favor/Presence	14	RWM as Supportive and Providing for Needs When Churches Are Not	7
RWM as God’s Salvific Work	9	The Church as Supportive and Providing for Needs	3
Religious Rituals or Figures Involved with RWM	3	Spiritual Nature of Physical Objects or Practices	20

Figure 3 *Number of times members of the Rural Women’s Movement made statements indicating their valuing of a non-dualistic worldview*

The inseparability of the physical and spiritual, which I am calling here a “non-dualistic worldview”, features in these women’s stories ambivalently. Through the experience of positive material turns in their lives, oftentimes mediated or facilitated by the deep solidarity of the massive and powerful Rural Women’s Movement, single mothers in RWM have been able to reinterpret their Christianity using the same non-dualistic methodology – but arriving at differing conclusions. We see here the embrace of ambivalence – in this case, the continued wrestling with

Christianity for a supportive theology as opposed to tossing out the religion as wholly harmful – and the tolerance, even celebration, of contesting voices in theology, as opposed to the idea often found in Western Christianities that there exists one “correct” theology. This has thus opened space for rural women and single mothers to assert their agency in creating contextual theologies that empower them, over and against prominent theologies that may vilify or victimize them. The assertion of contestation and embrace of ambivalence in religion and culture was mentioned 76 times. (See **Figure 4**) These statements include discussions between single mothers who disagree about whether or not single motherhood is a sin, invitations to interpret the Constitution or culture for oneself, interview participants’ mentioning of their own disagreement with their churches, and independently-formulated theological statements or theological interpretations of “non-theological” phenomena. Ngubane herself describes RWM’s methodology for cultural change as rooted in the embrace of contestation and ambivalence. According to Ngubane, “[RWM] never says, ‘What your culture says is wrong.’...Culture is not fixed!”⁴⁷⁵⁴⁷⁶ Another interview participant revealed her own disagreement with her church’s theology after she bore a child outside of wedlock, saying, “In church, it is not acceptable to have kids out of wedlock, but though I felt pressure and pain, I always believed God would help me. God would never let a single mother down.”⁴⁷⁷ This suggests a rejection of dominant singular, absolute interpretations and iterations of religion and culture that victimize subaltern, justifying women’s questioning of normative ideas and practices that vilify or victimize them.

Contestation is encouraged in the Rural Women’s Movement as a tool of empowerment, and RWM uses examples of ambivalence and contestation within traditional culture and South

⁴⁷⁵ Interview with Sizani Ngubane, May 20, 2013.

⁴⁷⁷ Interview conducted in May, 2015.

African Christianities as evidence that debate and the construction of alternative philosophies and practices is allowable and necessary. For example, when Sizani Ngubane first introduced me to the issue of *ukuthwala* and took me to a community meeting of RWM members in eMangweni to celebrate the success of RWM's interventions, she explained that victims of *ukuthwala* are often turned away by their fathers because they are no longer virgins, and their fathers fear no one will marry them. Ngubane states that this idea of premarital sexual purity is a legacy of apartheid rather than something intrinsic to South African culture. This valuing of virginity is directly related to property rights and inheritance, since the legitimacy of heirs and carrying of family names is not only a determinant of male status but also a means of keeping family wealth within a male's household and possession, says Ngubane. She states that mothers, on the other hand, are more likely to accept their victimized daughters but feel they do not have the power to change men's minds. Ngubane says that the goal of her work with RWM in this regard is to help women understand for themselves what human rights for women entail – and that they are deserving of human rights. She articulates that RWM's intervention never says, "What your culture says is wrong;" instead, their methodology is to unearth a core of gender equality in South African traditional culture, which they believe is an original feature of South Africa, muddled, distorted, and corrupted by the apartheid regime. To this end, Ngubane and the Rural Women's Movement hosts readings and experiential reflections for women within affected communities, pushing them to understand their culture, Christianity, identities, and lives through new eyes "until they say, 'Aha!' for themselves." As Ngubane explains, "culture is not fixed; that is why we are not walking around in animal skins still." What Ngubane and RWM are doing is exposing the ambivalence and contestation within South African traditional culture, thus deconstructing the implicit metanarrative that the way things are is the way things must be.

Recognizing that alternatives exist – and, in this case, that South African culture itself has not always been patriarchal but that the gender-based violence and inequality might be, as RWM teaches, a legacy of apartheid (a system that is widely regarded amongst traditional South Africans as a common enemy) – allows South Africans to discover legitimacy for their voices for justice and licenses women’s empowerment as an innately South African move. In such a way, RWM women are not only vying for their own empowerment but are fighting for South African culture itself.

This same willingness to contest metanarratives is seen in RWM women’s plurality of theologies and Christianities and their confidence contradicting or disagreeing with religious authorities. For example, one mother of four, a Zionist Christian who was abducted and beaten by two men when she was only fifteen years old, recalls that she was punished for six months in her church and forced to sit behind the church during services when she became pregnant. She reflects, “It was as though they thought I volunteered to get pregnant...I felt like a sinner hiding in church.” When she became pregnant with her second child at eighteen, her child’s father and his family were allowed to sit in the church, while she was still cast outside the building, until the man paid an *ilobolo* of nine cows. At this point, the church congratulated her on being a great woman because she was deemed marriageable by a man, and the church and her own family finally accepted her. While she says that she likes her congregation, she states that their “way of support” for her was to tell her that she is a sinner, and they inflicted upon her pressure and pain in addition to what she already endured as a single mother. However, rather than internalizing this message, the woman insists that churches must be supportive of unmarried mothers because “we did not choose this,” she says. To blame the women while the men enjoy their lives is not helpful, she continues. Contrary to the troubling messages of the church, this RWM member

always believed that God would help her and that “God would never let a single mother down.” One of the primary factors that encouraged her to contradict the teachings of the church was RWM’s entry into the community in which she lives. The Rural Women’s Movement shared information on what women could do in case of an abduction or threat of such and emphasized that this issue and women’s subsequent struggles are men’s fault rather than the women’s. RWM insisted that space should be created for women to choose whom to marry, which meant that women could no longer be viewed as transactional property but must also have rights to property themselves.

In yet another example, I interviewed two RWM friends in a township outside of Pietermaritzburg who disagreed about whether or not premarital pregnancy was a sin but both believed that the church’s treatment of single mothers and the theological rationale behind it was problematic. One of the women, a single mother, spoke of the stigma surrounding Christian women who become pregnant out of wedlock, mentioning that in her church, the woman must surrender her uniform that she wears to worship until the baby is one month old. At that time, the woman must wait outside the church until the minister sprinkles both the baby and mother, thus cleansing them. The mother must pay R2 to the church and approach the altar to be reinstated with a cleansed uniform. This process is publicly shaming to the woman, and the payment of the money, a significant amount for poor single mothers, reinforces the idea that premarital pregnancy causes material harm to the church community and creates a debt to society that the woman must “work off.” She feels herself to be a burden and a sinner. Even though the church may thereafter collect money and clothes for the mother and her child, she is still cast as the recipient of charity who requires people already experiencing financial straits to care for them. Rather than constructing this care for the female-headed family as an act of *ubuntu* and *ilima*, the

alienation of the woman throughout her pregnancy and through the first month of her child's life inflicts an isolating shame on the woman, which is not necessarily effectively repealed through her inclusion post-ritual cleansing in the church community. Instead, as the two women in this conversation reflect, in order for unmarried mothers and their children to be incorporated into the community, contra the concept of the nuclear family, the church must cease this practice, which they believe to be foreign to their South African beliefs – an import from Western or colonialist concepts of Christianity and privatized nuclear families.

The first woman voiced that she believes that premarital pregnancy is a sin, but her friend, who founded the church that rescued the first woman from an abusive situation, negated this idea, saying that she believes pregnancy – even premarital pregnancy – is a gift from God. She posits that it cannot be a sin because female heads of household do not choose it for themselves but God does. By retaining a theology of an omnipotent God, this woman proposes that God creates single motherhood, which must then be a blessing and a gift. Thus, the struggles of single mothers are not punishments for sin but rather symptoms of broken and problematic theologies. This woman continues to say that God makes some women strong enough in the womb to stand on their own as parents and does not will them to marry, while other women, equally powerful, are ordained to be married and will enjoy peaceful relationships. While the national conference of her church's denomination promotes premarital abstinence as a spiritual discipline and moral, this church leader promotes abstinence until after the woman receives her education because, she says, the Rural Women's Movement taught her that women must not be dependent on men.

This example of contestation and debate not only between these two women but between the women and their churches demonstrates the willingness of RWM women to challenge

prevailing ideas within their culture, nation, and religious tradition, especially those notions that are developed by authorities that may not be in touch with what South African traditional single mothers are experiencing. By emphasizing and publicizing ambivalence and the existence of alternatives, RWM women empower choice and exploit the ambivalence of the very systems that often victimize them to reclaim the potential power of these traditions and systems.

TOLERANCE OF CONTESTATION/AMBIVALENCE			
Indicator	# of Times Mentioned	Indicator	# of Times Mentioned
Women Who Believe Becoming Pregnant Out of Wedlock Is a Sin	4	Theological Statements/Interpretations Produced by Single Mothers	29
Women Who Believe Becoming Pregnant Out of Wedlock Is Not a Sin	12	Single Mothers Who Disagreed with Their Churches Theologies/Practices	17
Invitations to Read/Interpret Culture or the Constitution for Oneself	14		

Figure 4 *Number of times members of the Rural Women's Movement made statements indicating their tolerance of contestation or ambivalence*

Notably, these four characteristics of Christian single mothers' theologies, worldviews, and values that they expressed as members of the Rural Women's Movement and of the Christian faith all reflect either values historically embraced by South African culture or the strong precedent of Christian social activism in South Africa. The latter itself took advantage of values within South African indigenous culture itself and its own interpretation of Christianity to produce black liberation theologies specific to the South African context. In the case of these

RWM women, it appears that Gerald West's notion of "incipient theology," a theology that is not yet formally articulated but that is produced in the daily lives of these women and in their embrace of the possibility and propriety of liberation and empowerment for them, often even in the midst of shaming discourses and practices in their own churches, motivates their involvement in this social movement. In their interviews, they would often express that they believed bearing a child out of wedlock to be a sin, yet when asked what sin was, they would often indicate that they believed sin to be harming another person and that they did not believe themselves to have done so. They also expressed both a lingering shame for bearing children out of wedlock and a strong indignation over the Christian church's shaming of single mothers. These feelings were usually accompanied by passionate imploring of other single women to not wallow in despair but to get up and create change for themselves and their children. This ambivalence within them possibly points to the crossroads that mark their own existence and indicate how their religion has been shaped by multiple and contesting histories. Religion, coupled with their own ambivalent South African culture and the precedent of women's and Christian activism in South Africa has created a sort of alternative culture and ideology that questions, critiques, and contests dominant white South African – and often even traditional South African culture – as well as Western-influenced strains of Christianity.

Transnational Comparative Analysis through the Lens of Postcolonial Feminist Critical Inquiry

From an American perspective, RWM's example of single mothers employing their Christianity as a political tool to mobilize a social movement benefiting their own demographic seems exceptional. In the United States, single mothers have a poverty rate of 63% and work

more hours but have higher poverty rates than single mothers in other developed nations. Furthermore, 40% of American single mothers are employed in low-wage jobs, the highest rate in a study of 16 high-income countries. The situation is not improving either; Olga Khazan reports that the poorest single-parent families receive 35% less in federal support than they did 30 years ago.⁴⁷⁸ Sadly, education is not the key to gender equality or financial success: American single mothers at any educational level make significantly less than single fathers with the same educational level.⁴⁷⁹ While single mothers in the United States experience conditions and pressures that might be considered issues of injustice and inequality, prime ingredients for activism on their behalf, yet no such movement exists here. In a 2016 survey of a snowball sample of 25 American Christian activists involved in progressive social movements like Black Lives Matter, workers' rights, and LGBTIQ and gender causes, respondents indicated that they did not perceive a strong Christian presence, in terms of numbers or resource provision, in innovative or progressive social movements, especially ones concerning marginalized identities. On the other hand, all but one respondent responded affirmatively when asked if their faith served as motivation for their involvement in social activism, though they also expressed frustration with the absence of a strong collective identity of Christian social activists involved in their causes.⁴⁸⁰

Although women and activists interviewed both in South Africa and in the United States are too small in number to draw absolute conclusions, the information gleaned from this research may point to at least a couple of possible explanations. In the case of RWM, these women's use

⁴⁷⁸ Olga Khazan, "How Welfare Reform Left Single Moms Behind."

⁴⁷⁹ Timothy Casey and Laurie Maldonado, "Worse Off – Single-Parent Families in the United States," in *Legal Momentum*, December 2012. Accessed February 7, 2016.

⁴⁸⁰ Haley Feuerbacher, *Google Survey of American Christian Activists*, January 17, 2016.

of religion to construct an alternative culture and ideology supports single mothers' understanding of their identities as African women. A communitarian spirit, non-dualistic worldview, grassroots flow and sharing of power, and a high tolerance for ambivalence and contestation form the basis of traditional South African culture, as well as the historical mobilization of Christianity for liberation movements, and are vital supports to single mothers in their daily lives. Thus, the struggle for liberation of single mothers becomes for them both a religious struggle and a cultural struggle against apartheid's legacies. In the U.S. case, activists in innovative and identity-based movements (as those for single mothers would be) may struggle to organize because mainstream American evangelical Christianities often privilege a top-down flow of power, privatization, and a dualistic worldview that separates the spiritual and the physical. Furthermore, these forms of Christianity often display a low tolerance for pluralism and ambivalence. Thus, the ethos of organizing for such movements is not readily supported by many American iterations of religion as an alternative culture and ideology, and such efforts to organize may be viewed as a challenge to mainstream Christian identities.

A second compelling theory as to the difference between the two contexts' abilities to organize identifies the differences between the perceived relationship to and benefit from present flows and constructs of power that Christian single mothers in South Africa and in the United States hold. According to Bernstein, when a group has proximity to or feels itself to benefit from the status quo, the current constructs and systems operative in a society, or society's flows and concentrations of power, that group is less likely to openly engage in identity or innovative movements.⁴⁸¹ Because the Christian church enjoys some favor in society and in many cases benefits from the current U.S. systems in place, Christian single mothers may not feel themselves

⁴⁸¹ Mary Bernstein, "Celebration and Suppression: The Strategic Uses of Identity by the Lesbian and Gay Movement," in *American Journal of Sociology*, 103, no. 3 (November 1997): 531-565.

to be entirely disenfranchised. However, because RWM women are distanced from the locus of power in their society – which is found amongst the white, economically empowered males, they are more willing to openly engage in activism and organizing for change. Their identity becomes that of female Christian Africans, and their religion reflects and supports this identity. This identity is thus an open challenge to the counter-identity of the apartheid-influenced white South African and those who were appointed to power by this demographic.

Additionally, and related to this latter point, the economic empowerment of women in the Rural Women's Movement occurs communally, while economic empowerment in the United States is largely figured as privatized. In other words, RWM women discover the ability to challenge patriarchy and other forms of oppression through freedom from dependence on male-controlled wealth, resources, and economics, and they often do so by forming cooperative economic and property practices that support one another's well-being and collective identity and liberation. They can contest the power structure because they are finding amongst their collectivity and cooperation freedom from reliance solely upon this power structure; furthermore, their cooperative economic endeavors and communitarianism, as well as their push for women's rights and gender equality are read by RWM women as innately South African and Christian efforts and values. In the United States, however, the American Dream is predicated upon privatized wealth and resource ownership, and theologies have shaped up to support this. In evangelicalism, contestation of authorities is not necessarily yet valued as a worthy or licensed practice, so single mothers in the United States may not think of stepping outside privatized property and wealth ownership to find freedom from patriarchal and oppressive neoliberal

constructs – especially in a society that associates communitarianism with socialism and socialism with treachery and evil.

The activism of today's Rural Women's Movement is not only noteworthy for the vital role that Christianity plays in its members' activism but for its entirely-female, indigenously-led leadership. These women constantly transgress roles that their own faith and cultural traditions often prescribe for them, thus frequently placing them at odds with many of the leaders of these earlier progressive Christian movements in South Africa. Their ability to mobilize their faith and their gendered experiences in collective agency to effectively campaign against gender-based violence, for redistribution of land to indigenous women, and for better policies and practices to empower the livelihoods of single mothers and their children raises questions about the dearth of similar social movements elsewhere in our world and hopefully offers us a template for advocacy for single mothers.

Evangelicalism and Economics in South Africa Today: Is RWM Exceptional?

The Rural Women's Movement offers a fascinating case study of evangelical Christian unwed mothers engaged in progressive social activism that does not merely seek inclusion into existing systems and structures but that attempts to deconstruct what they view as patriarchal systems and practices, while simultaneously offering counternarratives in the form of theologies from marginalized voices and of alternative social structures and economic systems. More than simply being a case study elucidating the characteristics and dynamics that have allowed these women to organize and mobilize their voices to challenge hegemony, the example of RWM may present a template for constructing contextual theologies and a precedent for Christian social action by and for unmarried mothers. Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned a few significant

victories that RWM has achieved for local communities, for rural women, and for the South African nation. But the question remains: are their efforts impacting – or even just reflecting – a trend in wider evangelical culture in South Africa of Christians becoming engaged in progressive social action and critically challenging systemic patriarchy and oppression in the present day? In order to explore evangelical responses to issues of race, class, and gender in South Africa, I turn both to research and statistics published by reputable scholars of South Africa, as well as my own fieldwork with representatives of evangelical institutions, scholars, and activists.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, South Africa, at least on paper, ascribes to a neoliberal agenda, although significant groups and regions of the country are not fully engaged in neoliberal or late capitalist economic practices. According to Sagie Narsiah's work "Neoliberalism and Privatisation in South Africa," neoliberalism is characterized by deregulation of markets, fiscal austerity, and privatization; that is, under neoliberalism, the state's control of industries and services lessens while the private sector grows. When South Africa was colonized by the Dutch and the British, pre-capitalist modes of production were absorbed into capitalism when imperial forces took direct control of the means of production. For example, rather than the South African people utilizing the land collectively for the community's well-being, colonizers seized the land and its resources, building commercial farms, refineries, and mines, and employed native South Africans as wage labor to produce commodities from these resources. In such a way, the very nature of the labor process was transformed to mass production and exporting, as were the conditions of the labor. As a result, capital became concentrated in the hands of a few, thus centralizing power in South Africa.⁴⁸²

⁴⁸² Sagie Narsiah, "Neoliberalism and Privatisation in South Africa," in *GeoJournal* Vol. 57, No. ½, South Africa (2002), 29.

Initially, while fighting apartheid, the ANC was a liberation movement with a socialist agenda, but since 1994, the ANC has adopted neoliberal aims, argues Narsiah. In the early 1990s, the World Bank sent what Narsiah calls “missions” that targeted ANC researchers and policy advisers and trained senior ANC officials at the World Bank and IMF headquarters. Additionally, when the ANC came to power, it inherited huge debts from the apartheid regime, so its socialist program could not address the deficits, leaving South Africa with little recourse but to embrace neoliberalism as its economic ideal.⁴⁸³ Another issue that led to the shift in the ANC’s economic position is the intersection of race and class in South Africa. In this country, capitalism took hold decades ago and concentrated the means of production in the hands of a few. Today, those few are mainly white people, though in the 1980s and 1990s, these production owners were exclusively white. However, in South Africa, the oppressors and the oppressed were not separated by distance but coexisted in the business sector and industry. Thus, economic oppression and class-based power are integrally tied to racism, so that resisting racial oppression entailed resisting the economic system – specifically capitalism. However, the ANC struggled to address how to change the economy that had been built on a racial division of labor; while they dealt successfully with racism, they were less successful in building policies that would effect a just economic system that could compete with the big business and bureaucracy of apartheid.⁴⁸⁴

This shift to neoliberalism was formally manifested when South Africa passed 1996’s Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), proposing an export-oriented economy to stimulate growth. GEAR allocated 25% of South Africa’s economy to production for foreign

⁴⁸³ Sagie Narsiah, “Neoliberalism and Privatisation in South Africa,” in *GeoJournal* Vol. 57, No. ½, South Africa (2002), 30.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

markets, a comparatively high percentage, and relied heavily on the private sector for development. In 1999, South Africa's GDP and per capita GDP had dropped significantly, and unemployment more than doubled. In addition, the nation spent more on the international market than it made, and investment from the private sector declined. As Narsiah states, "This strategy [of neoliberalism and GEAR] was doomed to failure because the priorities of a people-driven development and the priorities of capital are different."⁴⁸⁵ Between 1993 and 2008, poverty rates amongst women were 4% for white women, 11% for Indian and Asian women, 33% for coloured women, and 72% for African women, while males in all races had lower poverty rates.⁴⁸⁶ However, while poverty and unemployment is certainly racialized in South Africa, it is also just as problematically cut across gender lines. Women as a whole are far more likely than men to be poor, and women in rural areas are the most vulnerable, write Margaret Chitiga-Mabugu, et al., in the action plan, *South African Women as Champions of Change: A Civil Society Programme of Action for the African Women's Decade*. This proposal claims that South African women's poverty has been created over centuries of gendered access to productive resources like land and credit, gender-neutral national poverty reduction strategies that fail to take into account needs and situations specific to mention (not to mention the unequal social, political, and economic playing field on which women start in comparison to men), unemployment, low levels of skills development, undervaluing of women's unpaid labor and roles, and domestic violence. Additionally, the proposal asserts that in the past two decades, changes in household structure, the decline in marriages and increase in unmarried mothers, and HIV/AIDS' effects have

⁴⁸⁵ Sagie Narsiah, "Neoliberalism and Privatisation in South Africa," 32.

⁴⁸⁶ Margaret Chitiga-Mabugu, et al. *South African Women as Champions of Change: A Civil Society Programme of Action for the African Women's Decade*, (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2014).

contributed to the feminization of poverty in South Africa.⁴⁸⁷ Thus, the official shift to neoliberal economic policies and class structure based on free-market capitalism have not succeeded in alleviating either individual poverty or national economic problems across the board and have in fact exacerbated inequality for women – especially black South African women – who remain concentrated in the lower economic classes and who have no access to the means to ascend the class hierarchy.

One aspect of neoliberalism upon which late capitalism's class system is based is privatization. This also happens to be a primary feature to which rural, traditional communities have embodied resistance (partially or fully, unintentionally or consciously), a staple of market capitalism that the Rural Women's Movement has at times explicitly challenged. Privatization can take many forms: tactical or temporary privatization intended to meet short-term goals, "pragmatic" privatization designed to solve social problems expediently but without any explicit ideological agenda, or "systemic" privatization that fundamentally alters a society and its economic and political institutions and aims by reducing the role of the government and public sector.⁴⁸⁸ In South Africa under apartheid, the Afrikaner government maintained close ties with the United States and Western European countries, which marketed privatization and neoliberalism as the key to economic growth and international development. After apartheid, argues Narsiah, several policies in South Africa were passed to increase private entities' provision of public services and to move decision-making to the local and private level instead of the national or governmental level. However, as Narsiah reports, private companies' main aim is

⁴⁸⁷ Margaret Chitiga-Mabugu, et al. *South African Women as Champions of Change: A Civil Society Programme of Action for the African Women's Decade*, 1-3.

⁴⁸⁸ Sagie Narsiah, "Neoliberalism and Privatisation in South Africa," 32.

to increase capital and profit, so their involvement with disadvantaged communities has been poor.⁴⁸⁹ Utilities such as water, sanitation, and electricity, as well as housing, have all been privatized, and many of the companies that own these services are multi-national and have monopolies in certain regions of South Africa.

The repercussions of neoliberal privatization in South Africa are cut across class, race, and gender lines – and unmarried mothers in every ethnic and class group are more negatively affected than males in the same groups. In “Gender Differentials in Household Structure and Socioeconomic Characteristics in South Africa,” Esther W. Dungumaro refers to these women as carrying a “triple burden”. This triple burden refers to the disadvantage unmarried women, especially single mothers, experience in the labor market and in other economic endeavors, the time constraints they face as primary caregivers to children, households, and the elderly and how this limits women’s economic and educational activity, and the higher dependency burdens that women carry as single wage earners.⁴⁹⁰ Interestingly, though, due to the influence of Western social structures and metanarratives, as well as the persistence of traditional African values and norms, the two types of household most prominent in South Africa are nuclear families and extended households.⁴⁹¹ This means that unmarried mothers rarely face the isolation that single mothers face in other contexts in which nuclear families prevail as the single most predominant household type. Especially significant for this project is the fact that both types of households are widely represented in evangelical Christian congregations, though location (urban versus rural), ethnicity, and sex do tend to determine the household form in these congregations. According to

⁴⁸⁹ Sagie Narsiah, “Neoliberalism and Privatisation in South Africa, 33.

⁴⁹⁰ Esther W. Dungumaro, “Gender Differentials in Household Structure and Socioeconomic Characteristics in South Africa,” in *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* Vol. 39, No. 4 (Autumn 2008), 429-430.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., 432.

Dungumaro, female-headed households (36.8%) have a higher tendency to be extended rather than nuclear than male-headed households (81.9%), and 76.4% of male heads of household reported living with their spouses, while only 20.2% of female heads of household lived with their spouses.⁴⁹² Amongst single mothers, those who have never been married are far more likely to live in extended households than nuclear households, and poor households are three times more likely to be headed by women than by men.⁴⁹³ Interestingly, though, statistics show that female-headed households elsewhere in the world – and even in other parts of Africa – are not necessarily poorer than other households when poverty and economic prosperity alike are shared, as in rural or traditional communities.⁴⁹⁴ The disproportionate number of unmarried mothers in poverty, then, appears to be connected to whether or not they have strong networks of support and practice a more communitarian social organization of family and fictive kin or whether they adhere to the privatized nuclear family model.

The reasons for the predominance of unmarried mothers in extended family households is certainly in many cases due to the traditional value of communitarianism, but it has also evolved to be a survival strategy, as well as a means of protesting the rampant privatization of resources and power that leaves many women and men in traditional communities disempowered. In Isabel Sawhill's study of poverty and female-heads of household, she posits that extended households

⁴⁹² A head of household can be defined as either the person acknowledged as such by members, the person who assumes responsibility for household decision-making, or the person who bears major responsibilities for the household's economic maintenance.

Esther W. Dungumaro, "Gender Differentials in Household Structure and Socioeconomic Characteristics in South Africa," 431, 434, 438.

⁴⁹³ Ibid., 439.

⁴⁹⁴ Margaret Chitiga-Mabugu, et al. *South African Women as Champions of Change: A Civil Society Programme of Action for the African Women's Decade*, 4.

are strategies adopted by people with economic instability to allow the sharing of resources.⁴⁹⁵ One of the consequences of the privatization of resources, though, is that many communities – particularly those in which female-headed households predominate, such as in rural areas – and many households themselves, disproportionately those headed by women, do not receive basic services. Despite the fact that the nation’s Constitution guarantees the universal right to adequate water and housing, access to these necessities has largely been privatized and restricted to those afford their increasing cost. Since 1996, the tariff on water for private citizens has increased an average of 19.195% each year, and on a whole, it has increased 183.81% since 1995.⁴⁹⁶ Since that same year, electricity charges have gone up 149%. Furthermore, there has been a large-scale movement towards commodification of housing, meaning that government-subsidized homes are increasingly being subsumed “into the private sphere of capitalist accumulation,” leading to private ownership of homes.⁴⁹⁷ When government housing developments go on the market for private purchase, those who could afford the rent but cannot afford the larger house payments see their homes sold from underneath them. As Narsiah writes, “Areas which are inhabited by the poorest people are now targets for the withdrawal of basic services,” and these poor areas, created under apartheid, are by and large populated by black South Africans.⁴⁹⁸

To compound matters, the South African government has as a goal the country’s increasing competitiveness in the global market, which means that globalization of its industries and resources is key. As foreign investors are brought in to take over South African businesses

⁴⁹⁵ Isabel Sawhill, “Discrimination and Poverty Among Women-Headed Families,” in M. Blaxall and B. Reagan (Eds.) *Women and the Workplace: The Implications of Occupational Segregation*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

⁴⁹⁶ Sagie Narsiah, “Neoliberalism and Privatisation in South Africa,” 35.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., 37.

and services, companies that cannot compete with these larger corporations are either overtaken or closed, leading to fewer jobs and lower pay for the growing surplus of workers scrambling for the few positions available.⁴⁹⁹ In the Chatsworth community of KwaZulu-Natal, the province in which my fieldwork takes place, 76% of residents are under the poverty line, 58% are unemployed, and 42% are living on welfare grants of R300 a month (\$21.97 USD). The majority of these residents are unmarried mothers.⁵⁰⁰ On a whole in South Africa, only 32.3% of female-headed households have piped water, as opposed to 43% of male-headed households, and 60% of male-headed households use electricity for cooking, while only 47% of female-headed households are able to. Additionally, 30.1% of female-headed households use pit latrines without ventilation, and only 20.3% of male-headed households must use these. Finally, 22% of female-headed households had an adult go hungry because there was not enough food in the past year, while only 15% of male-headed households had an adult suffer from hunger. On a whole, writes Dungumaro, there is no single consumable good that a higher percentage of female-headed households possess than male-headed ones, including but not limited to beds, radios, bicycles, and telephones.⁵⁰¹

However, citizens organized to protest these injustices in Chatsworth, as they are doing in the Shackdwellers Movement in Durban and the Rural Women's Movement in KwaZulu-Natal's rural municipalities. According to Narsiah, "there is growth of an incipient class consciousness among the oppressed, a collective consciousness being shaped through struggle over the everyday. Increasing mobilization is occurring as spaces of oppression are used as the seedbed

⁴⁹⁹ Sagie Narsiah, "Neoliberalism and Privatisation in South Africa," 35.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁰¹ Esther W. Dungumaro, "Gender Differentials in Household Structure and Socioeconomic Characteristics in South Africa," 442-443.

for a space of liberation.”⁵⁰² But the question of whether or not the causes of poverty, particularly the causes of women’s and unmarried mothers’ poverty, is recognized and taken up by evangelical Christian communities widely in South Africa as sins to actively combat or situations incumbent upon them to address must be explored.

Exploring South African Evangelical Christianities

One way in which I sought to ascertain evangelical Christian responses to inequality and oppression was to gauge the attitudes of different evangelical Christians and institutions towards class, race, and sex, and particularly to unmarried mothers. In South Africa, evangelicalism encompasses a wide array of denominations, more so even than in the United States, and, interestingly, each of these evangelical branches has had representation in the Concerned Evangelicals and related progressive movements. According to the Concerned Evangelicals’ *Evangelical Witness in South Africa*, “there are evangelical groups in every church from the Roman Catholic Church to African Independent Churches, with the so-called evangelical and Pentecostal churches being the chief bearers of this phenomenon.”⁵⁰³ During each of my visits to South Africa I studied Cornerstone Assembly of God Church in Pietermaritzburg, a growing, vibrant, intergenerational, and ethnically diverse community across from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Over the three years of my fieldwork, this congregation and its leaders exhibited an evolving theology and praxis that displays a growing concern for social justice and action. In 2013, the worship services included testimonies, music, a sermon, communion, and the

⁵⁰² Sagie Narsiah, “Neoliberalism and Privatisation in South Africa,” 37-38.

⁵⁰³ Concerned Evangelicals, *Evangelical Witness in South Africa: South African Evangelicals Critique Their Own Theology and Practice*, 26.

collection of an offering. Of these elements, women led the music in a coed worship team and prayed aloud, along with men, while men predominated in speaking and preaching roles. Pastor Dennis Solomon preached a sermon in which he said that modern urban society supports the indulgence of the “flesh”, which he defined as allowing sinful desires of our bodies control us, as opposed to putting God first in all our endeavors. In this sermon, he mentioned that one manifestation of the indulgence of sinful, fleshly desires, are couples “living as though they are married” when they are not.⁵⁰⁴ While Solomon juxtaposed the spiritual and the physical or “flesh,” the latter of which seemed to be epitomized in sexual activity outside of marriage, he also expressed that he believed the spiritual to pervade every part of life. In his sermon, elements of non-dualism were present, as were elements of the spiritual-physical binary common to many Western evangelical Christianities. Furthermore, his concern in these messages seemed to be on encouraging personal piety, which would hopefully lead to celibacy before marriage and compassion for others.

In a conversation with Pastor Solomon during this visit, he explained that Christianity to rural Christians was an all-pervasive phenomenon, since the supernatural in Africa is a very real concept. This coheres with his church’s belief that even the acts of the “flesh”, while dichotomized in opposition to the “spirit”, have spiritual – albeit negative – significance. Although he agreed with and admired rural Africans’ vision of the spiritual in the mundane, Solomon voiced concern about oppressive marriage practices among rural groups that he felt produced many unmarried mothers and were a “huge drain on the ‘system’” and problem in society.⁵⁰⁵ During our meeting, Pastor Solomon articulated a theological lens or framework for

⁵⁰⁴ Pastor Dennis Solomon (sermon, Cornerstone Assemblies of God Church, Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, May 19, 2013).

⁵⁰⁵ Interview with Pastor Dennis Solomon, May 19, 2013.

his church and its goals that he calls “Kingdom values.” According to Solomon, his church teaches that these Kingdom values celebrate family as the nuclear form of mother, father, and children. Noticeably absent from this concept are fictive kin and extended families, as well as unmarried mothers and their households. When asked what Scripture or theology he draws upon to support his notion of family, Pastor Solomon said that he believes the Bible to present a noticeable shift from polygamy in the Hebrew Bible to monogamy in the New Testament, as well as a shift in how marriage was confirmed. In the Hebrew Bible, posited Solomon, a union was privately consecrated through sex, whereas in the New Testament, the Christian Church acknowledges the marriage, though sex remains the consecration of the covenant. He also cited the text in the Christian Scriptures that mentions that a man shall leave mother and father to be joined to his wife as evidence for the nuclear family structure.⁵⁰⁶

However, Pastor Solomon reflected that talking about concepts of family in South Africa is difficult because ethnicity, region, and class all play a part in the differences in concepts and lead to a plurality of ideas about family, an awareness I did not regularly observe among leaders of evangelical communities in my U.S. fieldwork. While he actively asserted “Kingdom values” over and against indigenous culture as two oppositional worldviews and ideologies, he claimed an understanding that this was a “tricky, volatile notion.” For instance, he said, t he would never tell a couple who lives together to split up but instead would encourage them to marry, although he allowed that he would counsel a new couple who are having sex to split up and “get themselves on track with God.” Apparent in his rhetoric is the assumption that alternative sexual mores that differ from the singular concept of saving sexual relations for a church-consecrated marriage demonstrates that the persons involved in the relationship also experience spiritual

⁵⁰⁶ Interview with Pastor Dennis Solomon, May 24, 2013.

depravity. Yet, Solomon also stated that he tends to believe that a covenantal relationship is indeed formed through sex, regardless of whether or not it is recognized formally through the law or church, but he felt it still ought to be acknowledged in the Christian Church as marriage.⁵⁰⁷

During my time in South Africa in 2016, I was once again able to spend considerable time with Pastor Solomon.. I noticed that, as before, the congregation was ethnically diverse and intergenerational and that elements of the church services were led by members of all ages and races. One notable change was that women played a more prominent role in vocal leadership of these services. They led impromptu prayers, and during one of these, one of the women spoke on behalf of God, as a prophet would. Another woman gave a testimony and short sermon to introduce the time of offering, and I learned that many women participate now on the Finance Committee that helps to determine how Cornerstone ought to use its funds. I also noticed that the messages communicated during the church services seemed to have shifted from a focus on personal morality and pietistic devotion, as they were in 2013, to an emphasis on praxis and care for the marginalized, often at the expense of one's own comfort, as the fundamental goal of Christianity. One young black South African man gave a short message in which he asked the congregation, "How can we see our brothers and sisters in need and have no pity and think the love of Christ is in us?...How are we living daily? How are we using our money?"⁵⁰⁸ The sermon itself, delivered by Dennis Solomon, encouraged congregants to be willing to sacrifice their comfort for the Kingdom of God

⁵⁰⁷ Interview with Pastor Dennis Solomon, May 24, 2013.

⁵⁰⁸ Cornerstone Assembly of God worship service, (Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa), April 17, 2016.

in practical ways – namely, to be a channel to redistribute our blessings to a world in need and to the poor. Solomon specifically mentioned that many people in our world are motivated by power and popularity and that money is a means to this very power and popularity, that money has become a means a tool for manipulation and control. According to Solomon, giving selflessly and sacrificially, including giving up one’s economic excess – an aspect of privilege, in order to strive to end economic inequality is evidence of the state of one’s relationship with God, whereas in 2013, it seemed as though sexual abstinence was considered by Solomon to be a key indicator of spiritual health. As Pastor Solomon stated in 2016, “If [Christians] stop being a channel of God’s blessing to the poor, [they] will have a problem with God.” In such a way, Solomon recognizes that privilege is predicated on the existence of poverty and inequality and requires that the privileged give up their excess comfort to alleviate the suffering of the poor.

It seems as though his theology of the inextricability of the physical and spiritual has taken on a more economic tint, in that economic inequality has become to him perhaps the primary sin of his society, and sin itself seems to be in his theology more systemic rather than pietistic. In fact, Solomon explicitly deviates from the teachings of some Pentecostal churches regarding “spiritual warfare” and says that spiritual warfare, according to his interpretation, is the material, historical fight against darkness, brokenness, and bondage. He critiques the Christian church for developing “safe ways of doing Christianity” that have rendered it a nice charitable organization. However, according to Solomon, “real Christianity is about breaking bondage and breaking down walls and reconciling people to people and people to God... We should be asking, ‘How can I bring relief? How can I be an agent of change?’” This change, says Solomon, looks like reconciliation and peace, which is only effected by Christians getting involved in real work and real issues alongside many non-Christians who are doing great work because the goodness in

their hearts. Whereas in 2013, Solomon seemed to privilege conversion as the goal of Christianity, in 2016, his aim seemed much more towards practical application of the faith in the form of effecting social change, specifically in relation to poverty and suffering.

Furthermore, he seemed to be much more accepting of those outside the Christian faith, with diverse sexual moral codes, not only doing what he considers to be this holy work but also to be leading the way in activism and reconciliation.⁵⁰⁹ After church, Solomon spoke openly about changes in his theology, worldview, and ministry. As he recalled, he had personal and theological biases against other denominations and faith traditions until a friend challenged him to “get himself sorted out”. After this conversation, Solomon attended a conference on social justice, at which the speaker was a female who, Solomon says, spoke “godly, compelling words,” and he “felt the Spirit of God.” As it turns out, the speaker was in fact Catholic, and Solomon’s bias was effectively changed in that moment. Since then, he says, he has become increasingly frustrated with other evangelicals, who often focus on speaking about the Bible and theological truth but never talk about practically applying it. Solomon never mentions the preferability of the nuclear family in our conversation, nor any sort of priority in his ministry to converting non-conforming individuals to comply with this model of family. Instead, in our 2016 meetings, Solomon tells me with sadness, regret, and concern in his voice about a young lady who is pregnant and living with Solomon and his wife who did not call him when she was having false labor because of the shame she is still experiencing. Apparently, a member of Cornerstone told Solomon’s houseguest that her child was a bastard, and she refuses to disclose to Solomon who has said this because

⁵⁰⁹ Cornerstone Assembly of God worship service, April 17, 2016, and April 24, 2016.

Solomon is openly angry that a Christian would say this and she does not want to get anyone in trouble. When I question the change in Solomon's focus or perhaps his theology since 2013, he says, "When we are dealing with real things on the ground, sometimes our philosophy goes out the window."⁵¹⁰

Cornerstone Assembly of God is one example of a church body in South Africa that evidences a changing evangelical spirit amongst urban and predominantly white-led evangelical congregations, one that is embracing the values endemic to South African tradition as consistent with Christian values and one that openly critiques and challenges the theological, social, economic, and political imports from what might be considered Western empire. Although certainly a dynamic and powerful leader, Solomon is not even at the forefront of these evangelical departures from personal piety and progressive engagements with social action but is instead following the lead of many of his congregants. One such person, a member of Cornerstone's Finance Committee, is Gita Dickinson, a Dutch political scientist and human rights activist who earned her doctorate in Russia, worked in the Czech Republic, and moved to South Africa with Lawyers for Human Rights for three months and never left. , Dickinson then established her own consulting business, working with rural communities and traditional women to help them develop and fund their economic ideas and social changes. According to Dickinson, township and rural people have great skills but lack capital and organization, so her job is to help them put together business plans, raise funds, filter and field questions, maintain focus, and keep up communication with their community. In the communities in which she works, those who bring money into the local communities are mostly women and are the ones who Dickinson says do the most work.⁵¹¹ Throughout our conversation, both Dennis Solomon and Gita Dickinson

⁵¹⁰ Interview with Dennis Solomon, April 17, 2016.

⁵¹¹ Interview with Gita Dickinson, April 21, 2016.

agreed that the distribution of wealth worldwide is unequal and concentrated amongst 1% of the population (“148 people, actually,” quips Solomon.) The need for the redistribution of wealth and power, I quickly learn, is a common refrain in Dickinson’s discussion of global and local politics and social issues. Interestingly, she cites both Galatians 3:28, which expresses that in Christ, distinctions between ethnicities like Jew and Greek, classes like slave and free, and sexes like male or female are erased or obsolete,⁵¹² and Karl Marx as inspiration for her work, ethics, worldview, and theology. According to Dickinson, Marx draws from the Hebrew Bible’s principle of justice and exhorts people to live in community and look out for one another, a concept which she says Cornerstone Assembly of God “is really into,” even while other churches in South Africa remain segregated. Dickinson speaks of Cornerstone as unique in that it is intercultural, interracial, and intergenerational and expresses that one of the greatest needs in South Africa is for churches that do not simply seek to attract or pander to people and entities with money. These churches, says Dickinson, do not want to integrate racially or challenge unjust systems because they do not want to lose money. “People are resources, too, but churches do not see it that way,” exclaims Dickinson. “We can all make a difference.”⁵¹³

When I asked Dickinson about how churches relate to social justice and activism, she responded that she has not seen churches in rural areas “out in the field”. However, this could be in large part because these churches lack money, resources, and networks to accomplish the kind of work necessary or to afford to risk the funding they do receive by

⁵¹² Galatians 3:28, NRSV Harper Study Bible.

⁵¹³ Interview with Gita Dickinson, April 21, 2016.

critiquing the very entities that finance them. She did mention that the Diakonia Council of Churches in Durban is an example of a cohort of churches that creates social justice platforms. This organization describes itself as “an ecumenical, inter-church agency, working with churches and church organisations [*sic*] in the pursuit of a more just society,” by “[facilitating] processes with church social action groups to bring about positive lasting change in communities.”⁵¹⁴ This group is made up of diverse Christian denominations from the Roman Catholic Church to the Quakers to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa. Even the Dutch Reformed Church is listed as a current full member. Some of the Diakonia initiatives are some of the more familiar “acts of charity and mercy” that American churches seem to favor – establishing a community garden outside a Lutheran church, enrolling unemployed young people in a job readiness program and offering entrepreneurial training, and hosting a health and wellness event to promote healthful lifestyles.

However, some of the work documented in Diakonia’s 2015-2016 Annual Report testifies to a more progressive bent to some of these church’s concepts of social justice and action. For example, many churches participated in peace marches to end violence, regarded by some as xenophobic attacks, in KwaZulu-Natal and created community dialogues in which survivors of xenophobia could share their feelings and stories. In addition, several Diakonia churches lobbied government to vote no to a proposed electricity tariff increase that would victimize impoverished communities disproportionately, launched a Thursdays in Black Campaign in which they wear black one day each week to protest gender-based violence, and established ongoing community conversations on racism.⁵¹⁵ These initiatives demonstrate a

⁵¹⁴ Diakonia. <http://www.diakonia.org.za/>

⁵¹⁵ 2015/2016 Annual Report, Diakonia Council of Churches. http://www.diakonia.org.za/wp-content/uploads/bsk-pdf-manager/Annual_Report_2015_2016_177.pdf

willingness on the part of member churches to engage with and challenge power differentials, oppression, injustice, and inequality built into systems, relationships, institutions, and cultures, rather than just regarding social problems as isolated issues that can be remedied through empowering or educating the individual who suffers from the problem.

Pietermaritzburg is home to the Evangelical Seminary of Southern Africa (ESSA), an institution that trains prospective scholars and ministers for work in evangelical ministries. In 2016, I met with Melt van der Spuy, the new Principal of ESSA and a former Vineyard Church pastor who also happened to be a doctoral candidate at Fuller Theological Seminary in California, to discuss his theological views on gender relations, unmarried mothers in the Christian church, and Christian social action. Van der Spuy opened the conversation by informing me that he identifies as egalitarian when it comes to gender relations and that he feels strongly that that many church's teaching of gender complementarianism is part of the problem in South Africa and the world over. According to van der Spuy, the Vineyard Church in South Africa espouses what he calls a "soft complementarianism" of "equal but different" sexes, while van der Spuy himself is more "liberal" than the denomination as a whole. Nonetheless, I learn that the Vineyard Church employs four female lead pastors in the 25 or so congregations in South Africa.

When I asked what evangelicalism in South Africa's relationship with gender issues, equality movements, and justice work is, van der Spuy gave a brief overview of South African evangelicalism. As van der Spuy opines, evangelicalism in South Africa follows trends from the United States but differs from American fundamentalism and "does not have the baggage of American evangelicalism." In 1986, when the Concerned

Evangelicals published their social justice treatise, evangelicalism in the nation shifted to contextual theology and began focusing more heavily on holistic ministry to the community. The gospels, with their stories of Jesus' interactions with and actions on behalf of humanity, became the uniting narratives for South African evangelicals, as well as their rallying cry to social action. However, stakeholders became angry at the move away from biblical literalism. Many evangelical churches had a dualist and pietistic theology that excused them from the fight against apartheid, says van der Spuy, citing that primary cultural value of South Africa – a non-dualistic worldview – as a main ideological incentive for activism. As van der Spuy recalls, the Evangelical Methodist and Anglican churches did stand against apartheid; as for the Vineyard Church, it “did more than most and not nearly enough because it was so into revival and renewal.” Today, says van der Spuy, finances and patriarchy drive many evangelical churches, which focus on Paul's contextual writings on gender roles and relations and class hierarchy, rather than on Galatians 3:28.

When asked about the greatest issues that the Christian Church ought to be addressing, van der Spuy cited class inequality and patriarchy as fundamental sins in South Africa, which also manifest as racism. According to van der Spuy, evangelical theologies have also shaped up to support these structural and systemic hierarchies and orders, to induce shame in those who pose a challenge to these, and to turn the focus of Christians to personal piety and submission to unequal and oppressive systems. South Africa has the biggest gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots,” says van der Spuy, and race-based differences and inequalities are less pronounced than the differentials between classes. For example, in Pietermaritzburg, which van der Spuy refers to as “the heart of colonialism”, there is only a small middle class, and the workplace is actually the site of the greatest racial integration. This means that social divisions cut across class

lines, based on workplace, so that white South Africans and black South Africans may actually face similar social pressures and inequalities due to class-based oppression.⁵¹⁶ However, civil society and other cultural institutions are being structured to preserve racial and sex-based hierarchies within class differentials, so that white South African men, and to a lesser extent women, remain part of the elite economic class, while black South Africans (and especially black women) remain in the working class or in poverty. Schools that remain predominantly white (such as private schools and elite public schools located in more expensive neighborhoods) are cost-prohibitive to the working class and poor and offer the best education. The average South African still lacks a high-school education. And yet, according to van der Spuy, the Christian church has not developed a strong interest in challenging the current education gap in a large-scale manner. In terms of college educations, businesses sponsor the best and brightest students' educations, and there are scholarships and corporate sponsorships available for the top students in rural areas to attend college, but these are inaccessible to the majority of the population, and corporate sponsorships for education leave the student beholden to the businesses that sponsor them. Furthermore, as van der Spuy states, the problem is not necessarily remedied through expanding the accessibility of university education because such an education often does not yield skills that can produce immediate income, nor does it address the dire lack of available jobs.⁵¹⁷

⁵¹⁶ The opposite is also true: both white and black South Africans can be part of the power center, based on their inclusion into the elite class. Former President Jacob Zuma is an example of this.

⁵¹⁷ Interview with Melt van der Spuy, (Evangelical Seminary of Southern Africa, Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa), April 26, 2016.

When asked what van der Spuy believes could be a solution to these problems and what response evangelical Christians ought to have or what role they should play, van der Spuy articulates a systematic theology of community. According to van der Spuy, who proclaims himself a social Democrat, private ownership of small businesses creates incentive for workers, but government-owned big businesses have an important place in the economy. However, evangelical Christians do not vocally endorse government support – in fact, they often oppose it outright – because, in an act of what van der Spuy calls “cognitive dissonance,” churches have ignored aspects of the Christian Gospels, the book of Acts, and Paul’s epistles that value community over individualism and that emphasize care for others. This, he says, relates directly to the question of evangelical churches’ theologies for (or lack thereof) and treatment of unmarried mothers. He believes that evangelical churches largely ignore unmarried mothers and do not make attempts to recover empowering theologies or create social action on their behalf. When I ask why he believes this is, he replies, “How much money do Latina and Black women and single mothers give to evangelical church in the United States?” In South Africa, van der Spuy states, women are treated patriarchally, and in evangelicalism, a shame-based culture still exists. In African churches, the messages often reflect a literal biblical interpretation, and the prosperity gospel, inherited from the United States, has taken hold.⁵¹⁸ All of these dynamics – patriarchy, shame-based culture, literal biblicism, and prosperity gospel – all have economic dimensions that keep women, and especially single mothers, subjugated. All operate as metanarratives that promise blessing (oftentimes considered to be manifest as financial prosperity) for compliance and submission and justify shame, struggles, marginalization, and even victimization as the due penalty for resistance to or failure to comply with these

⁵¹⁸ Interview with Melt van der Spuy, (Evangelical Seminary of Southern Africa, Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa), April 26, 2016.

metanarratives. Furthermore, patriarchy is often supported by literal biblical interpretations, and support for and adherence to this order, according to the prosperity gospel, is coerced in exchange for the promise of material prosperity and the threat of shame and suffering. In such a way, the same people – white, male, economically elite class – retain power, while the “Other” scrambles for inclusion into a small percentage or shadow of this group’s prosperity and power, which can only be obtained through adhering to an oppressive hierarchical norm.

I am interested in hearing whether van der Spuy believes there exists grounds for a potent counternarrative that will challenge these norms and that will empower unmarried mothers. In response, van der Spuy asserts that “we *will* find a theology for women who are ostracized or are single mothers.” He cites N.T. Wright’s work on women, specifically the example of Mary listening to Jesus at his feet, taking men’s place. As van der Spuy explains, Jesus says that this is appropriate for women to receive equally with men. He also mentions how Jesus restored the hemorrhaging woman holistically and chose the Samaritan woman at the well, whom van der Spuy describes as both the “town slut” and the “worst of the worst in a bad town”, to be an evangelist and activist to bring change to her community. He proposes as a starting point for a theology for single mothers what he calls a systematic theology of grace. According to this theology, Jesus converts our individualistic, self-centered hearts to communally-connected ones focused on care for others. He describes this theology as the Kingdom of God come to earth, in which the individual, corporate, and systemic are transformed to be inclusive and characterized by self-giving love rather than individual pietism or self-interest.

Of course, there are those within evangelical Christianity in South Africa who disagree and even actively oppose such progressive views and the efforts of RWM and like-minded allies to empower women and Christians to challenge economic, social, gender, political, and religious norms with alternatives. Opposition is abundant, especially as this empowerment benefits single mothers to shift blame from themselves as individual sinners who are suffering the consequences of their deviance to patriarchal and hegemonic systems that concentrate power in a select group and misuse religion to support their domination over others. , In 2013, I attended a stadium revival in Pietermaritzburg led by internationally-renowned South African evangelist Angus Buchan. In his message, he used exclusively androcentric language and at one point said that being a “housewife” is the most admirable profession. Further addressing issues of gender and sexuality, Buchan asserted that revival is about to take place in Nashville, Tennessee, because at an event there at which he spoke, twelve committed couples who were engaging in premarital sex asked him to marry them immediately so that they would not be living in sin any longer. He used this story to segue into exhortation of the crowd to pray for the conviction of sin, as this is the key to revival in South Africa, he said. According to this message, heterosexual marriage is the remedy for the personal sin of premarital sex, which Buchan considers to be a spiritual blockade for national Christian revival. By implication, unmarried mothers then represent a national problem, as well as a spiritual problem. More explicitly, though, Buchan’s message could be considered to cast shame upon women who have engaged in premarital sex and gotten pregnant, thus bearing a visible mark of their sin. Such messages encourage intolerance of premarital motherhood as an appropriate response to what he considers a sin with national repercussions on a spiritual plane, therefore tying personal morality to spiritual wellness and care for one’s nation. Finally, in terms of engagement with social struggles and systems, Buchan

urges his audience to retain hope not that God will empower us to challenge and change situations that cause suffering, but rather that God's power will enable us to "live above our struggles and problems, [so that we can] be like eagles, soaring solitarily above the flocks of other birds." Not only does this message undercut communitarianism as a South African and Christian value but it also encourages a dualistic worldview that separates our spiritual and mental peace of mind from our material, physical situations. This dualism is idealized and divinized in Buchan's theology.⁵¹⁹

In a critical analysis of power, privilege, and patriarchy in Buchan's messages, Sarojini Nadar uses Stephen Whitehead's and Frank Barrett's theory of the three means of creating "masculine power" (namely, forceful power, positional power, and discursive power) to demonstrate how Buchan – and those who echo him – are evangelizing a toxic masculinity. Through the use of discourse about "real men", essentializing manhood as rooted in its "not-womanness" by juxtaposing man-as-head with woman-as-helper, Buchan is engaged in the task of creating a certain type of man as a monolithic (and in his eyes, "divinely ordained") caricature of power as domination over the Woman-Other.⁵²⁰ In his Mighty Men's Conference and in the rally I attended, Buchan deftly links this making of (toxic) manhood with narratives of anxiety surrounding morality, struggle, and spiritual health in South Africa, using examples of "feminized" men and "masculinized" women (for example, female heads of household) as both evidence of a serious problem and as the threat itself.

⁵¹⁹ Observation of Angus Buchan Revival, (Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa), May 26, 2013.

⁵²⁰ Sarojini Nadar, "Palatable Patriarchy and Violence against Wo/Men in South Africa – Angus Buchan's Mighty Men's Conference as a Case Study of Masculinism," in *Scriptura* 102 (2009): 551-61.

In another example of evangelical opposition to Christian progressive social action on behalf of unmarried mothers or that challenges existing social, political, and economic norms as hegemonic, oppressive, or unjust, I engaged in a conversation with another representative of the Evangelical Seminary of Southern African (ESSA). This man, a professor and administrator from Germany who relocated to South Africa as a missionary, felt strongly that the Bible supports complementarian gender roles in which the sexes are assigned appropriate, unique, and differentiated genders to which individuals ought to adhere. He cites I Timothy 2:12, which reads, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man,” as excluding women from spiritual authority, though not necessarily from organizational, social, or religious authority.⁵²¹ When asked what he believed ought to be a Christian’s duty in this world, he replied that their primary objective is spreading the gospel, which he defines as salvation through Christ, while justice work should remain secondary (albeit allowing that Christians should include this as a concern.) The problem with Christian social action, especially as it pertains to race, class, and gender issues, he says, is that it conflates Christianity and culture, creating a dangerous syncretism in which Christians become focused on engagement with culture and cultural change rather than on spiritual issues - or on submitting to current orders as divinely ordained. He urges Christians to ask what the biblical relations are to cultural practices before attempting to engage these cultural elements or change them, describing culture as a strategy of survival. The various forms of survival strategies, he argues, carry import and legitimacy in their given context, and it is not a primary Christian duty to focus on earthly matters. He defended patriarchy as a tool to keep women from usurping inappropriate power roles and contends that we must differentiate between the motives of patriarchy, which he endorses, and the practice of patriarchy, which he

⁵²¹ I Timothy 2:12, NRSV.

allows may be at times problematic. The problems of patriarchy, this administrator claimed,, are caused by our fallen nature, which jumps at the chance to establish our own superiority and domination over others, sometimes in violent ways, yet he argues that matriarchy and historical feminism have been guilty of the same sins, crimes, and injustices as patriarchy and are attempts of fallen, sinful women to dominate and victimize men. When asked how his theology justifies patriarchy, he responds that Eve was deceived, not Adam. Furthermore, he interprets Galatians 3:28, a text often read to support the equality of men and women, as referring to salvation rather than to social positions, and believes the same thing can be said of apartheid and slavery as patriarchy. He believes that the oppressed and marginalized ought to be treated with respect and dignity but are ordained to have a lower position in the social hierarchy as part of their existential identities. Finally, he supports the original idea of apartheid, saying that humans tend to group with those like them – a defensible act in his mind – and that apartheid was simply an attempt to protect the interests of each group and the divine ordination of a particular social hierarchy based on race and gender. Notably absent from his theology and ideology was a concept of how class figures into power relations, how economic control has tended to align with those in power, and how biblical interpretations and engagements with social and cultural practices have never been singular, nor remained static as power has changed hands and contexts have varied.

While unmarried Christian mothers in the rural areas of South Africa may find the motivation to organize for social action and change in movements like the Rural Women's Movement more from their perceived distance from power and oppression within extant systems and institutions than from any particular theological message, it

appears as though evangelical Christians in urban areas, in other ethnic groups, and amongst other social classes might draw more inspiration for activism from the theological and historical precedent and resources for Christian social action. In terms of the single mothers in rural areas in question, this may stem from several different dynamics. For one, the Christian church has not recently presented an active, material, liberating power for many of the women, so it is often regarded as yet another complicit or even oppressive force. While many of the interviewees spoke of supportive steps taken by their churches or their congregations' embrace of their pregnancy, motherhood, and children, only one woman indicated that a church leader had been at the forefront of her liberation from an abusive and oppressive situation. In fact, the church leader who took the initiative to provide for the survivor was a female RWM member herself, and the survivor's testimony of this relationship spoke more to the woman's actions as a friend, fellow rural woman, and RWM member than to her identity as a religious leader or to her influence on the theological beliefs of the survivor. Sizani Ngubane herself only speaks one time about a rural church leader playing a significant role as a clergyperson in advocacy and activism for rural women; it was in fact a member of the clergy in the uThukela District who called Ngubane about the problem of *ukuthwala* in the community and asked her to hold workshops and intervene to end gender-based violence. Thus, while the church provides for many RWM women and single mothers a powerful worship space or venue for learning about and communing with the divine, rural churches have not been on the forefront of women's rights and activism for traditional South Africans in recent years. In contrast, the Rural Women's Movement exists to be actively involved in the amelioration of political, social, and economic struggles these women face and draws power from the women's collective identity as the subaltern.

The relative silence of rural churches in justice work was attested to by many contacts in my fieldwork. Multiple times, Ngubane expressed that church support or involvement in RWM was minimal, while one RWM member claimed that she encourages other single mothers to go to the Rural Women's Movement rather than to their churches for help because RWM becomes a family and trains women to think for themselves, whereas she felt the church not only inflicted shame on single mothers but also present opinions as facts and do not even draw these from the Bible. Gita Dickinson reflected that she had not seen churches in rural areas "out in the field," wondering if there might not be one vision of churches and the roles they are supposed to play in rural areas. Likewise, Sthimbeso Zwane, an employee and theologian in the Ujamaa Centre, actually does focus on training rural churches to do Contextual Bible Study to develop their own "bread theology", as he calls it – a theology that responds to the question, "How do you preach Christ in a poor congregation?" This important work has been met with success in sensitizing and mobilizing congregations to develop liberating theologies out of contexts of oppression – *from* those on the margins. As these congregants formulate new theologies and theologically-inspired and justice-minded actions and changes, they also seek to influence clergy to follow their lead. Even with these successes, the work of church and cultural conversion – from conservative theologies that uphold gender inequality and appeal only to the spiritual to the neglect of the physical, political, and social well-being of congregants to progressive, active, and holistically liberating theologies and practices – is slow work. Thus, in terms of rural single women, RWM presents them with messages, ideologies, and practices that meet them where they are, uphold their dignity and rights as human beings, and support their very survival.

RWM speaks to and enters situations that members' churches either avoid or appear to exacerbate.

In addition to the reticence of churches to leave the sidelines, so to speak, another factor that contributes to the secondary place that overtly theological messages and religious precedent ostensibly take for RWM women is the distance from power that women – and especially single mothers – feel in the church, in contrast to their power in the Rural Women's Movement. Zwane notes that rural churches often operate by a top-down power structure, which cuts against a primary South African value of communitarianism. The culture, inherited from Western-influenced Christianities, posit that there can be no deviation from the Bible, and the pastor reads the Bible to and for his congregants. Zwane explains that theology is regarded today amongst many as being done by the educated and as spiritual, operating under a dualism between spirituality and politics that is foreign to traditional South African ideas and historical theologically-inspired activism. Theology today is often regarded as “doctrinal” and singular or monolithic, reified and concrete. Thus, theology becomes closed and relegated to the elite so that rural women may not feel the freedom on their own to question beliefs that contradict their experiences – regardless of how ambivalence and contestation has functioned positively for black South African Christians and women historically in the overturning of the apartheid regime. This may explain the “gap” between what some RWM women embody and express in terms of their political rights and dignity and their seemingly conflicting theological ideas that they still hold, such as those that espouse the sinfulness and shame of premarital pregnancy. In contrast, however, RWM empowers women to draw conclusions for themselves and gives them the tools to “theologize”, diagnose, and prescribe solutions. This bottom-up flow of power encourages a sense of ownership in its members over the ideas, successes, and direction of RWM

itself, whereas most women who took part in interviews seemed to feel themselves to be passive recipients or lower-level participants in their church as opposed to integral leaders. What I did observe was that those women who were long-standing members of RWM seemed not only to hold theologies that were more systematically consistent with their moral standard of gender justice and South African rights, but they often also found themselves in leadership roles in their church and were more vocal about their beliefs, encouraging their churches to take part in liberating actions for gender justice. Thus, it appears that RWM helps women discover their own abilities to philosophize and theologize and to contest seemingly dogmatic and reified practices and ideas. Through groups like RWM, these women learn that they can and are theologizing, and their discovery and demonstration of their power through grassroots, bottom-up organizing in RWM helps them influence their churches that otherwise would not be open to their leadership.

Finally, a third reason why RWM women may derive more strength and inspiration from their collective identity as distanced from power as opposed to other Christian groups that still find their initial motivation for activism in explicitly theological messages and activism has to do with power itself. Zwane and others testify to a shift in South African organized Christianities that differs from the four historical features of South African Christianity that spurred Christian resistance to apartheid – namely, communitarianism, grassroots flows of power, the non-dualistic unity of the spiritual and physical, and an embrace of ambivalence and encouragement of contesting, plural voices. Interestingly, these features are vividly present in the Rural Women's Movement, contributing to the creation of a culture and ideology amongst these members

that support gender equality and social justice – and that take on theological tints. However, rural churches are perhaps the institutions in these areas that are situated most proximately to neoliberal power in that many of them are completely reliant upon a few wealthier individuals for their survival. Churches exist in patronage relationships that mean that these institutions in rural areas are subject to the wills of private and privileged individuals – who make up a considerably small group. West describes the historical shift in the South African churches that contested apartheid, explaining that they were a key platform in the liberation struggle because the “people’s theology”, developed at the grassroots, arose and became a prophetic systematic theology when it was joined with the work of “organic intellectuals”. According to West, churches now say that “we have liberation, so now we can be Methodists and Anglicans and do the ‘work of the church.’” However, churches are struggling with the transition to dealing with new issues (and, in many cases, old issues post-apartheid.) The theology of the 1980s and 1990s lost energy as prophetic theologians went into government and became close to power, forsaking of solidarity with the poor. As new social movements develop, like the Rural Women’s Movement, there are few theological companions, and religion gets handed over to “the right,” the state, and the economy. The result in churches is a widespread focus on individualized, private, and personal religion, as well as a commodification of church and religion, especially amongst evangelical congregations because of their relative autonomy and susceptibility to co-optation by strongly-organized groups. Furthermore, as West attests, patriarchal leadership of churches in the rural areas is often confused by women’s agency, which seems to be undermining traditional and biblical ways, as well as threatening alliances of power that purportedly bring increased well-being to suffering rural areas.⁵²²

⁵²² Interview with Dr. Gerald West, (University of KwaZulu-Natal/Ujamaa Centre, Pietermaritzburg, KZN, South Africa), April 18, 2016.

Whereas these dynamics are still present in churches in urban areas and comprised of other ethnicities, churches are perhaps the broadest-reaching intergenerational institution in urban and suburban civil society. As such, the church serves as a regular gathering place for people who otherwise would not have this opportunity in urban areas; the very proximity that church places people in offers an opportunity for collective identity amongst congregants. This is true for rural congregations as well, but in urban areas, congregants are more actively involved in the neoliberal economic system on a daily basis, as negotiating and performing within this is prerequisite for dwelling in these areas. Thus, their worlds often consist of their economic labor, family life, and church, and while church is undoubtedly intertwined with and influenced by economics, it appears to stand as a sort of citadel for the masses outside of neoliberalism. The increasingly palatable dualism of the spiritual and physical deepens this idea. However, in contrast to the dynamic in rural areas, the urban church's reputation for dealing with the "spiritual" and identity as people's main participation in civil society seems to many to be transgressive of and rebellious against whatever they deem to be the evil powers of this world – especially in a cultural context in which most else (i.e. the neoliberal marketplace, politics, pop culture, etc.) seems to put individual members in contact with evil powers. The private family, too, is elevated in importance as a ground for the same sort of preparation for spiritual warfare. What groups like the Ujamaa Centre and Cornerstone are attempting to do is to use this sort of "rebel identity" to reinterpret theology in a way that demonstrates that the Christian church's difference from its surrounding culture is not just a spiritual difference but is meant to be used to fight for justice today rather than just holiness and eschatology. They are flipping the

script, so to speak, and telling Christians to stop relying on secular society for their salvation in the present world, picking up a theology that was used historically and says that the Bible does not just fight personal sin but the sins of empire that create hell on this earth. Church may just be the most transgressive, “outsider” space people in urban areas can occupy and form a collective identity.

In terms of the Rural Women’s Movement, though, West’s overview of the recent history of the growth of privatized religion and co-optation of churches by neoliberal interests and power alliances offers an important insight into the vitality of the role of Christian single mothers in RWM. First of all, rural women in KwaZulu-Natal not only have access to the Rural Women’s Movement as an alternative community to Christian churches but they also live in less privatized communities as a whole, giving them multiple spaces to gather on a daily basis and share their experiences. Significantly, each of these spaces affords them different perspectives and introduces ambivalence and diversity that can challenge their ideologies. Aware that they are not benefiting from power systems in South Africa, they may feel themselves to be distanced from those more easily included in the rural churches and from the churches themselves that enjoy some patronage and relationship with power. They also feel themselves to be free – however detrimentally – from the strictures of the neoliberal system, though enslaved by the poverty this system inflicts on them. This ambivalence allows them to formulate different means of engaging in the economy, and the same could be said for their religiosity. Perhaps RWM provides a sort of alternative church, and these women – these single mothers – are formulating a “people’s theology” that can develop into the prophetic systematic theologies necessary to awaken and mobilize South African churches for social justice and liberative activism once again. Perhaps

the RWM women I encountered are the “theological companions” coming alongside progressive liberation movements.

Although members of the Rural Women’s Movement certainly utilize religion as ideology and culture in the form of the quadrilateral of communitarianism, non-dualistic worldviews, grassroots or bottom-up flows of power, and historical precedent, and pluralism and ambivalence, as well as historical examples of women’s and Africans’ successful activism, there exists a perceivable gap between the rates at which women’s groups clearly on the margins of society are able to organize and the comparably small rates at which evangelical women and single mothers who participate to whatever small extent in the norms and institutions approved of by the power center. This gap seems to be closely related to how much Christians feel themselves to benefit from the existing power structure.. As Gerald West states, churches have relaxed their critical edge because they feel as though they have achieved the liberation they sought. He contends that the former prophetic theologians who protested apartheid have formed a critical solidarity with power and government, members of which, incidentally, were “yesterday’s poor and oppressed,” and because these theologians became close to power, they forsook solidarity with the poor.⁵²³ With that in mind, if the single mothers of the Rural Women’s Movement do attain access to the means to greater prosperity in the current social system (for example, through land rights, economic empowerment, access to education, and a growing job market available to them), will they continue to pursue the overturning of patriarchy, or will their enthusiasm for activism ebb? They are actively and successfully resisting policy that would deepen the claws of patriarchy in their economic resources

⁵²³ Interview with Dr. Gerald West, April 18, 2016.

and political agency, finding paths to economic participation through formation of co-ops and commitment to socializing their resources – including childcare, asserting their agency as members of traditional councils, and joining together to create solutions to gender-based violence – with quantitative success. As they find new entries into the market, will their awareness of the operation of patriarchy and their drive to resist it remain heightened. Or if they feel themselves to benefit from a patriarchal system, will they have the tools to continue to fight patriarchy wherever it is found – for example, in the continuing stigmatization of single mothers in the Christian Church and society and the perpetuation of unequal rights for female heads of household?

Those Christians who do not espouse progressive ideals such as feminism or social equality or who voice concern about taking action against systemic issues like classism, poverty, sexism, racism, or homophobia seem to display two general attitudes towards the existing social order. Those who believe that God ordains the particular power structure in their society tend to trust that adherence to the likeness of those who enjoy success and some degree of power under that particular system will be capable of achieving a level of middle-class comfort characterized by a certain economic standing and a number of assets, successful relationships, job security, a healthy heterosexual marriage and family, and general social respect. Such people may allow that the morality code to which they ought to adhere will place them at odds with prominent cultural attitudes, leading to a loss of popularity amongst “secular society” and even temporary suffering (such as job termination or clientele loss due to refusing service to LGBTQ individuals, incurring bullying for refraining from drinking, drugs, or raunch culture, and even loss of relationships in order to avoid the temptation of premarital sex). These forms of suffering are regarded nobly. However, what is significant is that, while the general message is that Christian

culture is at odds with the secular world and will result in some degree of suffering, there remains an expectation of this suffering to be short-term and material blessings to eventually arrive and testify to God's reward of the aforementioned moral behavior. In addition, although these messages tend to portray those who achieve the height of power in a society as selling out to "secularism" or evil, in reality, those who do in fact have global power are disproportionately heterosexual, white, American, male, and engaged in capitalism. All of these characteristics are lauded by evangelical Christians as having an inherent morality that is Christian and divinely sanctioned.

The second group of evangelical Christians who willfully refrain from progressive social action openly recognize that current systems are evil and induce suffering in innocent groups and individuals. However, according to the theology prevalent amongst this group, suffering is a means of attaining Christlikeness, and attention ought to be focused on spiritual salvation, often mediated by and reflected in adherence to morality codes of abstinence, rather than engaging in political entanglements with earthly and transient powers. For these groups of Christians, it seems that exposure to theological counternarratives and historical examples of activism partaken by Christians who share a similar social location and theological lineage or pedigree as them is a catalyst for a shift towards more progressive leanings, as well as engagement with social activism. The theological shifts of Dennis Solomon in recent years and in the growing practical ministry of Cornerstone Assembly of God Church as it becomes involved in social action are examples of this. Are there theological resources within Christianity to empower unmarried mothers who may not be completely disempowered to address economic

inequality, social injustice, political alienation, and religious discrimination against unmarried mothers?

Like Melt van der Spuy, West and his colleagues at the Ujamaa Centre believe that the Christian religion contains the grounds for a theology by and for single mothers. The women of the Rural Women's Movement oftentimes verbalize in theological terms a theology of empowerment for female heads of household and for their activism, but there is not yet a formalized consensus or conviction among them that offers affirmation to single motherhood and justifies an active challenge to religious stigmatization of unmarried mothers. More often than not, the female heads of household associated with the Rural Women's Movement display ambivalence and perhaps even a dissonance or contestation in their beliefs regarding their status as single mothers and the spiritual valuation of this identity. This incipient theology, to use West's term, is a potent resource for the construction of a liberation theology that can fuel sustained action. West and other Ujamaa Centre leaders intentionally work on the edges of the Christian Church, under the conviction that facilitating agency amongst the marginalized will gain the attention of the center and that change will occur in the center of the church's power via the margins. According to West, as new social movements develop, attendant theologies should be formulated by those equipped to come alongside those at the grassroots, who are producing what West calls a "people's theology."⁵²⁴ The theological companions that West suggests are instrumental to the articulation of a theology for single mothers that can produce long-standing action and change beyond the special interests of rural women – a theology to counter patriarchy as it vilifies and victimizes single mothers – sounds akin to Antonio Gramsci's organic intellectuals. These organic intellectuals are those connected to the grassroots, to the people at

⁵²⁴ Interview with Dr. Gerald West, April 18, 2016.

the margins, who have the tools and opportunity to speak back to power, as well as to organize the grassroots' voices and agency.⁵²⁵ Through Contextual Bible Study, the Ujamaa Centre's "product", if you will, seeks to connect with women's lived reality and incorporate their "people's theology" or incipient theology into a public theology.

Continuing the legacy of the Concerned Evangelicals' theology, West believes that the God of Christianity inspires aspects of South African culture and that many elements of traditional culture are in fact the same as those encouraged by Christianity. By articulating a formal theology in support of these features, Contextual Bible Study and the Ujamaa Centre, along with "organic intellectuals", can call into question many of the contesting theologies and practices of the Christian Church, as well as those of wider society that result in oppression and hegemony. West agrees that the primary enemy of a theology and social action for Christian single mothers is the focus on individualized, private, and personal religion in evangelical churches. This privatization of faith has become a fundamental element of evangelicalism.⁵²⁶ The task of theology, says West – echoing the theology of van der Spuy – is to move Christians out of their individual, moralizing terrain that leads to self-righteousness and shaming and into communal and systemic terrain. To this end, the Ujamaa Centre's cohorts address the intersections of Christianity and economics, sexuality, race, HIV/AIDS and other health issues, gender, the environment, and national/international political issues. They utilize the methodology of "See, Judge, Act", allowing their observations and experiences of societal dynamics and issues inform their theological inquiries, judging appropriate responses by turning to

⁵²⁵ Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, Vol. I, ed. Joseph A. Buttigieg, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

⁵²⁶ Interview with Dr. Gerald West, April 18, 2016.

a contextual reading of the Christian Scriptures and consulting those most affected by the issues, and taking action on their conclusions, only to repeat the cycle by critically reflecting on their action in light of the responses of those at the margins.

Carrying out the “See, Judge, Act” methodology, Sthimbeso Zwane encourages the rural Christians with whom he works to begin by asking why people are poor and how they might go about fixing this. He says that, unfortunately, the metanarrative in evangelical Christianity is that if you are not employed, you are lazy or lack faith. That is, the individual is the problem.⁵²⁷ This is exactly the issue of individualization and privatization of suffering that has acted as a smoke screen for inquiry into the systemic and communal causes of and solutions to the struggles of single mothers – and this individualization and privatization also segments women into nuclear families and cuts them off from communal ties and resources. Thus, shifting theology from personal and privatized to become a systematic philosophy for overcoming self-interest and generating communal ties and identities might lead to critical challenges to social and systemic issues, the reclaiming of empowering messages and ways of life within Christianity for single mothers and others on the margins, and the formation of counternarratives and alternative social, cultural, and political practices that specifically address contextual societal problems.

However, another barrier to a theology and action empowering to Christian single mothers is the patriarchal patronage that evangelical Christian churches enjoy. According to West, patriarchal power is threatened by democracy and confused by women’s agency, so bottom-up, democratic flows of power within church structures are often rejected in favor of more bureaucratic, hierarchical power structures.⁵²⁸ These top-down power flows and the

⁵²⁷ Interview with Sthimbeso Zwane, April 25, 2016.

⁵²⁸ Interview with Gerald West, April 18, 2016.

centralizing of power, ownership of resources, and decision-making amongst a small group of mostly males – and, in many cases, mostly white, middle- to upper-class males – is given theological justification as a divinely sanctioned order. Democracy and women’s voices disrupt this order. In these congregations, where women may actually feel themselves to benefit in some ways from the patronage of patriarchal entities and systems, single mothers are accepted and tolerated but not necessarily empowered in ways that address the systemic causes of their poverty and marginalization in society. To this point, West refers to Marcella Althaus-Reid’s *Indecent Theology*. According to Althaus-Reid, LGBTIQ+ Christians are considered so “indecent” to mainstream, more conservative factions of Christianity that they are able to form a collective identity and create what she calls an “indecent theology” that exposes the “indecent” latent in the Christian Scriptures themselves, a theology that explains how oppositional to traditional norms, morality, expectations, and systems the Christ of the Bible can be interpreted to be. In such a way, those who irrupt common human categories and systems are more akin to the heart of the original movement of Jesus Christ than modern-day institutionalized Christianity.⁵²⁹ In some ways, this is the unformalized ideology behind the Rural Women’s Movement, in which black traditional South African women who refuse to relinquish their indigenous culture, who head their households, and who reject many Westernized practices and customs such as privatization are able to unite and claim the sanctity of their indecency and rebellion against power.

But, as West says, in their churches, these women are not indecent, they are improper. In fact, single mothers from all social locations in South Africa find themselves

⁵²⁹ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*.

in this same position in churches – improper but not indecent enough to form a social movement. Motherhood is a celebrated identity the world over, but especially so in South Africa, where it is both culturally and theologically celebrated and is thought to tie present generations to their ancestors. What is needed, asserts West, is an “improper theology”.⁵³⁰ This improper theology will call our attention to the injustices in the midst of our own perceived privileges and in our own congregations, will bring to light the relationship between those who “win” and “lose” in our social institutions and systems and our current concepts of sin, and that recognize that not all benefit equally in this world or even in our churches.

⁵³⁰ Interview with Dr. Gerald West, April 18, 2016.

Also see his work:

Gerald O. West, “Queering the ‘Church and AIDS’ Curriculum: Tracing an Improper (and Indecent) Trajectory,” in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no. 1 (2018).

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

A fundamental conviction of this project is that stories and the act of storytelling are key to liberation and the struggle against hegemony, as well as the deconstruction of the metanarratives that feed the power of hegemony. In our stories and in our storytelling, we embrace and embody our agency and counternarratives that destabilize the totalizing mythology of metanarratives that fail to capture our realities. Using a methodology of postcolonial feminist theology, which holds that stories invite us to see that which resists the totalizing force of empire-supporting metanarratives, this project has gathered and retold the stories of Christian single mothers in the United States and South Africa, as well as the stories of other progressive activists who have resources in the Christian faith with which to defy empire.. These stories recall and redeem a past that defies empire's attempts to silence it – a past rife with resources for building counternarratives and resistance. What is more, these stories invite us to imagine a different and possible future than the one scripted by the power center, and they call us to see what we, as humans navigating empire's systems in differentiated ways, hold in common. The constructive work of storytelling is an act of dialogic imagination, a term coined by Kwok Pui-lan. According to Kwok, dialogic imagination finds similarities and differences in familiar as well as unexpected places and invites us to “[catch] glimpses of oneself in someone else's story.”⁵³¹ Dialogic imagination is sparked by, as well as fuels, the power of story to gather and

⁵³¹ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 30.

unite us and to direct us to resistant counternarratives that herald a practical hope for a future of liberation for vulnerable and oppressed women:

These disparate elements [in story] that staunchly refuse to follow the set pattern, the established episteme, the overall design that the mind so powerfully wants to shape, interest me because they have the potential to point to another path, to signal radically new possibilities.⁵³²

Mindful of this power, my intent in this project is to elevate of the stories of single mothers who have been neglected, vilified, and silenced, but it is also to create an interstice in the tightly drawn dualisms of the metanarrative, a creative hybrid space for transnational dialectics and dialogical imagination. I join James R. Cochrane in his conviction that local wisdom, often expressed through embodiment and story, is not overwhelmed by dominant and totalizing discourses, and that “the church and its theologians needs the wisdom of the specific local Christian communities if it is to be both ecumenically and pastorally valid.”⁵³³ This project is indebted to the single mothers within American evangelicalism and of the Rural Women’s Movement who influenced or participated in this work, as well as all others who lent their voices and stories to a rich and vibrant potentiality for an alternative reality and truth.

According to Kwok Pui-lan, globalized neoliberal capitalism’s impact on culture and theology has not been clearly articulated because our analysis of culture and religion is often compartmentalized from dynamic and “rapidly changing socioeconomic conditions.” Therefore, we need a fresh and deep well of counternarratives, embodied or articulated, that irrupt the neatly constructed metanarrative, that find the chinks in its armor and prove themselves worthy contenders. We need counternarratives that emerge from the daily experiences of people like

⁵³² Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 50.

⁵³³ James R. Cochrane, *Circles of Dignity: Community Wisdom and Theological Reflection*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 5.

single mothers who suffer unjustly at the hands of a wide-reaching system of patriarchy and domination – ways of survival and ideas about life that run contrary to the “neoliberal evangelicalism’s” prescription for “what works” and what is correct; in such a way, these lived experiences not only prompt our creativity to consider alternative concepts and practices but also provide a sort of counter-proof of alternatives to privatized evangelicalism and capitalism that “work”. As James Cochrane asserts, local wisdom from marginalized “ordinary readers” of Christianity might offer the stories, surplus signification, and embodied counternarratives we need to effectively challenge empire and bring life to the spaces to which it deals death:

[...Local] wisdom, as subjugated knowledge, may be grasped as epistemologically privileged: It gives us insight into what otherwise remains unseen about ourselves, our theories, power relations, and society. Because local wisdom is systematically marginalized, it provides a particularly sensitive measure of the nature of a system’s boundaries and effects.⁵³⁴

Whereas Cochrane’s work centers on the power of local readings of the Christian Scriptures to give voice and body to counternarratives that defy top-down, dominative power and neoliberal structures – focusing on those without formal theological education without regard to gender or relative economic or social status within the local community, I believe that gleaning the insights of local wisdom must begin by listening to those most oppressed by neoliberalism – in this case, single mothers. Postcolonial theological critique is interested in exposing how theologies, biblical interpretations, and Christian narratives machinate with empire, and empire involves systems of male power. This patriarchy is constantly reshaped and reemerging as empire takes on new forms, but while it affects women differentially, it also affects women globally. Postcolonial feminist scholars must explore the intersections of productions of knowledge and capital, race, class, gender, and centers of power and domination, focusing on women in what

⁵³⁴ James R. Cochrane, *Circles of Dignity*, 22.

Kwok Pui-lan calls the “contact zone.” These are spaces, structured and impacted by inequality and conflict, of encounters with empire where people of different statuses and backgrounds are brought into contact with each other.⁵³⁵ The Christian – and evangelical – single mother is a woman in the “contact zone,” embodying hybridity in this interstitial space.

Amongst the women with whom I worked for this project, the counternarratives they presented were at times consciously developed to challenge the dominant messages and practices that they had found harmful, such as when certain women proposed a theology of sex based on a different ethics from the abstinence-only morality rampant in evangelicalism, and when South African women formed the Rural Women’s Movement to fight for their rights to land, which they work and share together. Other times, it is perhaps more apt to call these women’s counternarratives incipient theologies or embodied theologies. Embodied theologies are counternarratives that the women live because they are necessary for their holistic survival. Incipient theologies, asserts Cochrane, are theologies formed when “believers untrained in the formal canons or history of theological method, reflect upon their faith, [thus engaging] in the task of theology in a provisional way, gathering an as yet untested wisdom about the meaning of their faith.”⁵³⁶ Both embodied and incipient theologies are being formed by single mothers and contain profound concepts, ideas, perspectives, and ways of living and being that testify to the limited, fragile, and constructed nature of the metanarratives that position a singular theology, morality, model of relationality, economic system, and so on as the only path to the ultimate good. Furthermore, these embodied and incipient theologies reveal the vitality, validity, and vibrancy of alternative paths.

⁵³⁵ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 81-82.

⁵³⁶ James R. Cochrane, *Circles of Dignity*, 22.

While more attention in Cochrane's and other robust work with "ordinary readers" focuses on the profundity of incipient theologies, my work has revealed the acuity of embodied theologies. Rather than just articulating beliefs based on their experiences of faith, daily life, and local wisdom and history, the single mothers who participated in this study bore witness to theological and social counternarratives through their practices and actions, even when these contradicted the formal articulations they offered. Profoundly, this offers an almost reverse mirroring of the operation of neoliberalism and patriarchy in Christian metanarratives: these metanarratives claim to be "good news" for us and develop a tight foundationalist systematic theology to support their claims to be not only in our best interest but also the only faithful interpretation of Christianity. However, the practice and application of these metanarratives – the *embodiment* of them – contradicts the message they send. They victimize and villainize, oppress and marginalize. They testify to a different doctrine and higher good – namely, the accumulation of power as domination within the elite class - than that which they purport to endorse.

The pervasiveness of these metanarratives that authorize, mythologize as central and vital, and mystify as axiomatic, universal, and divinely-ordained the values and practices of neoliberal capitalism that reward the elite and maintain a patriarchal social stratification to the detriment of those outside of the center of power potent tools for normalizing empire in our ideologies and culture. We must take seriously the role of religion – in this case, evangelical Christianities – in protecting and perpetuating the consolidation of power amongst the elite. At the same time, though, we must attend to the potential for evangelical Christianities to provide a counternarrative that can legitimize and authorize resistance; social action, and the validity of alternative practices, social configurations, and beliefs already embodied and enacted in our world. Yet narratives alone are not enough to shift because our ideas of the Divine, the self, the

Other, and the ultimate good are inextricably bound to, impacted by, and often reflections of what we see and experience in the world around us. Therefore, counternarratives must be both ideological, cultural, and practical. There is potency in embodying alternative and seemingly transgressive practices and practical configurations, such as female familial headship or communitarian and non-privatized kinship and economic structures, and demonstrating the workability of these, over and against the metanarratives that deem these inviable. The embodied theologies of the women in this study are actions and practices that may contradict their own articulated beliefs. They may still repeat vocal agreement with the metanarratives of evangelical and patriarchal Christianity and neoliberal capitalism, but they act and practice a different gospel – one that testifies to a different doctrine and higher good: that is, an ethics of love and liberation that envisions a holy world as one in which all people, starting with the most oppressed, have shared and equal access to thriving of all people. Though embodied rather than voiced, these are powerful theologies, the vital pieces of a puzzle that, when cohering components are added to the existing pieces, will form a picture of human culture, religion, and society that looks quite different from the picture we are told is the only workable one.

If a logic of domination is the governor of systems of broken relationship and inequality in our world, then privatization is the legislation that ensures that this logic prevails, even amongst those who are not actively or consciously participating in domination and competition. If privatization and the logic of power as domination can be overcome by embodied, incipient, and formal counternarratives and theologies – or at least challenged notably and consciously, then the metanarrative status they carry that rules out the viability of alternatives and options will have been discredited and interrupted, opening up interstices for new logics, ethics, and possibilities to push through. It is helpful to evaluate the alternative operation of religion as

ideology and religion as culture in the spaces and bodies colonized by the logic of domination and system of privatization.

South African and American evangelical single mothers share notable commonalities with one another, but whereas the Rural Women's Movement is one example of a significant visible and effective collective of Christian single mothers that is mobilizing for their rights, there is currently no such sizable social movement of Christian single mothers in the United States. While we might point to the differences in employment statuses amongst American single mothers and rural traditional South African women, noting that employment schedules and rules may preclude the former's ability to give the significant time and energy to a social movement, this is by no means the whole picture, and even this explanation reveals the need to discuss how power in employment plays a role in preventing social action. Instead, there are differences in the extent to which South African and American single mothers feel themselves to benefit from the systems at play, differences in willingness to engage in social activism at all, and differences in how the women view the relationship between their spirituality and their material world and relationships. If Christian single mothers in South Africa feel it appropriate to organize for their own rights but Christian single mothers in the United States do not, what are the differences that create this significant contrast? What are the keys to mobilizing the power of counternarratives within Christianity to challenge the hegemony of harmful theologies and metanarratives and to divorce the Christianity of single mothers from empire, patriarchy, and neoliberalism so that they can mobilize for their rights, empowerment, and access to means of thriving? I believe that this project reveals at least six factors that increase the felt need to organize and mobilize for social action and liberation and that transform single mothers' religious commitments into an impetus for social activism:

- 1) understanding power differentials and expressions of power as constructed rather than ordained, along with recognizing systemic sin, in such a way that the group sees itself as oppressed collectively, systematically, and historically
- 2) connecting to histories of Christian progressive social action
- 3) embodying communal social organization and communitarian spirit
- 4) socializing power at the grassroots
- 5) embracing the inseparability of the material and spiritual
- 6) welcoming contestation and ambivalence in religion and seemingly authoritative and stable structures and myths.

By undertaking this transnational project, it is my hope that in these pages, embodied, incipient, and formal theologies can work together to engage in the process of dialogic imagination, weaving together the stories of all those who would take up the task of struggling against the logics of domination and privatization and the oppressive power center that perpetuates these. I believe the aforementioned six elements can provide a toolkit, in a sense, for the effective building of alternative Christianities, formal theologies, and social movements, as well as for the challenging and even dismantling of hegemony. Thus, I will, in this conclusive chapter, evaluate the significance of each of these elements to evangelical single mothers and offer components for a constructive contextual theology and for a practical way forward into liberation by and for single mothers.

Systemic Sin and Power

What the case of single mothers in evangelical Christian circles reveals – especially in the case of RWM women – is that counternarratives, messages, stories, and beliefs that contradict harmful, dominant ideas and theologies are key to striking at the roots of oppression. While some of the RWM women may still express ambivalence about whether or not premarital sex is a sin,

all interview participants articulated a firm belief that women deserve equal rights, that they are worthy of male respect and are never deserving of violence, and that, regardless of whether or not they believed their premarital pregnancy to be a sin, they were in good standing with God because of their commitment to caring for their children and for others. In their minds, their ethics of other-care determines their standing with the Divine, as though this is the ultimate act of faithfulness to their God. Furthermore, although some women identified church messages idealizing abstinence and the two-parent family as both harmful and lacking authority for them, all RWM women identified social patriarchy and any messages within or outside the Christian church that supported male domination of women and women's exclusion from power and from access to the means of thriving as sin, perhaps because it stands in stark violation of their value of other-care.

American single mothers also considered themselves to be in good standing with their God, though this was cited as either being due to their rejection of theological messages that label premarital sex as innately and always sinful or being due to their personal repentance for premarital sex. While they certainly practiced other-care and often mentioned that this was a central value for them, American single mothers did not name their compassionate care and responsibility for others as the determinant of their good standing with God. There also seemed to be a greater reluctance to identify patriarchy inside or outside of the Church and to label as sin women's exclusion from power and from access to the means of thriving. In other words, amongst the Rural Women's Movement members, there is a collective understanding of world, national, and local economic, social, and political systems as operating unjustly and patriarchally. They thus develop counternarratives that offer alternative arguments regarding women's worth and capabilities, indigenous rights and culture, and communitarian

understandings that challenge privatization. Some have extended this dissonant thinking to theology and questioned or even rejected Christian teachings and practices that label single parenthood as the result of women's sin. However, they believe that their activism in RWM is inspired and empowered by the Divine, and they have worked out theologies of women's and indigenous rights and egalitarianism that fuel their challenge of macro and local systems. Organizations like the Ujamaa Centre are working to extend this dissonant culture and ideology to institutional theologies, or theologies that address the Church's theological and practical paucity in dealing appropriately and consistently with unmarried mothers.

In the United States, the interview participants might have embodied alternative cultural values that challenge the hegemony of patriarchy and its promulgation of the nuclear family, but they did not always consciously recognize this dissonance. While they often espoused theologies contrary to mainstream evangelical messages regarding sex and the family, they did not necessarily connect the Christian Church or particular theologies with their material struggles. Instead, the church served as an oasis for them that offered spiritual solace and empowerment to deal with daily difficulties that are generally accepted as "just the way things are." Sin is largely considered by these interview subjects to be individual transgressions like selfish indulgence, pride, lack of spiritual devotion and faith, or failure to be responsible. None of the interview participants blamed their struggles on systemic sins like patriarchy or class exploitation though some spoke about the Church's failure to address adequately the needs of single mothers or talked about what they determined to be harmful theologies and treatment from churches and Christians that made them feel shame.

Likewise, in South Africa, the interview participants also exhibited a sort of ambivalence and dissonance in that some held to the belief that the premarital sex in which they had engaged

was sinful, but they could not necessarily articulate why this was sinful. At the same time, though, they protested churches' judgment of single mothers and treatment of them when they were pregnant. RWM women all spoke of RWM as their oasis or safe space that offered empowerment through both its messages and its actual actions, and some spoke of their churches as offering spiritual empowerment, though only three women mentioned how their churches tended to their practical needs. RWM women were far more likely to openly acknowledge the operation of patriarchy in their churches and communities than were American Christian women. What I believe this indicates is that there is a notable difference between counternarratives that locate sin in macro systems and in their repercussions on micro levels – manifest in interpersonal sins akin to their systemic forefathers like greed, selfishness, commodification of human life, violence, and domination – and metanarratives that identify sin as primarily personal failures. In the United States, evangelical theologies often emphasize sin as a personal transgression of God's will for which the individual ought to take responsibility, often to the neglect of addressing systemic evils and injustices. Though the privatizing of religion predates neoliberalism, the current traction of this privatization of sin may reflect the narratives attendant to neoliberal capitalism – the messages and culture that promote privatization in the economy. Neoliberal capitalism is an all-encompassing and far-reaching system that requires, produces, and perpetuates both an ideology and a culture of privatization. The success of the system is predicated on the pervasiveness of this logic of privatization, which we see reflected in evangelical theologies that privatize sin, families, and even religion itself:

The dichotomy between communal and personal ethics – or between market forces and human development – allows Christians to accept the market as 'good.' Maximization of wealth becomes a virtue in and of itself, as well as a reason for being, and competition separates the sheep from the goats. Economic 'losers' result from a lack of personal

ethics to manage their own lives properly. Failure in being employable indicates a collapse of moral duty to maximize one's potential in the labor marketplace.⁵³⁷

This is one of the problems with the paradoxical ethical basis of privatization: it operates on the grounds of a presumed dualism between the personal and the communal, so that what is best for the individual and for one's biological or marital family takes precedence over what is good for others. The basic assumption here is that the personal or private and the communal are not intrinsically interconnected but instead are connected only when we choose for them to be or else are connected by some loose, weak relation that may not be essential. Success and failure become personal and private and are accepted as such by Christian communities because theologies have shaped up to echo this. However, there is a socialized aspect to this theology, as well: while the sin is perpetrated only ever by the individual, the repercussions are felt socially, nationally, and ecclesiastically as an infection and weakness that traumatizes and damages the entire Christian community or nation. Thus, single mothers are vilified for their struggles, and those surrounding them can ignore the straits of female heads of household without recourse. Yet, paradoxically, one of the tenets of the metanarrative encouraging privatization is that private, personal, household-based profit will promote communal well-being. Significantly, though, emphasis in policy and economics is placed on the success of elite households, which supposedly will trickle down to others in society. The connections between the private citizen and household and the broader community is mysticized rather than logically reasoned or made concrete, and the messages of the metanarrative do not encourage a focus on the well-being of the community but rather a priority to one's self, which in some ill-defined way, is said to benefit society at large.

⁵³⁷ Miguel Torre, "Global Exploitation," *Courage to Think Differently*, ed. George S. Johnson, (Cambridge, MN: Adventure Books, 2013), 245.

In studying American and South African single mothers and their felt relationship to the power-making systems in their contexts, it is clear that both contingencies of women are actively creating counternarratives, new practices, and new theologies that empower them. For example, both are reworking traditional concepts of Christlikeness to positively compare the selflessness and love of single mothers with that of God. Both value leaders that “look like them” as a signal of hope that they too can lead. However, there is a difference between the high consciousness of oppression and motivation to organize and take collective action among the single mothers of the Rural Women’s Movement and the relatively low collective consciousness among American single mothers who still retain hope that they can achieve success and power within the given system without it changing. The latter group finds hope and remittance of *shame* through the counternarratives they consciously acknowledge and espouse, and these counternarratives tend to focus on personal spiritual status and individual sin. This relates to Mary Bernstein’s theory of proximity to power: the felt benefit, no matter how small, from the system in place – that they can receive a paycheck (no matter how inadequate), that they can find a job (no matter how unstable), that they have housing and transportation (no matter how unaffordable and substandard), and that they see people “that look like them” who have apparently achieved success all fuel the belief that they too can achieve this status. Furthermore, the privatized theologies and messages of evangelicalism also play a heavy role in the internalization and privatization of struggles among single mothers in America. However, there are counternarratives embodied by these women that, if they rise to the conscious level, could motivate an awareness of systemic sin and oppression and the ability and need for them to challenge these together. It is essential to conscientization that their stories of material struggle be shared and that the statistics of the straits of single motherhood and that publicity be given to

the historical constructions that have formed the concepts of nuclear families and the unjust legislations that victimize single mothers. Yet it is just as important that discussions of class become part of our regular conversations, our education, our theologies, and our justice work so that we become aware of this shared oppressor and of our relative distance to and from the power center.

Connecting to Histories of Social Action

Both American and South African national histories boast testimonies of Christians' engagement in liberation movements and social action. In the former, churches – especially Black churches – were fundamental agents of the Civil Rights Movement, providing infrastructure, resources, and spaces where people who already had a collective identity as congregants met regularly and where conscientization could take place. Christian women were at the forefront of abolitionism, and their discovered capabilities for effective organizing and leadership led them then to create the First Wave of the Women's Movement. In South Africa, indigenous black Christians were active in apartheid resistance from its beginning, but the large-scale awakening and engagement of Christian churches, as attested to by the Kairos Document, the Concerned Evangelicals, and the Pentecostal denouncement of apartheid, signaled a watershed moment. Power then shifted towards liberation, democracy, and the end of state-sanctioned apartheid.

However, the way that evangelical Christian single mothers view engagement in social movements today appears to differ between the two countries. The ten American women who participated in my interviews were less likely to speak about political and national histories or to reference issues that were not overtly spiritual, such as living wages, women's rights, the wage

gap, patriarchy, or race. Two women, however, did speak about low wages, one spoke about race, and four spoke about domestic violence and abuse. This last topic was actually discussed openly in the single-parent ministry group I attended for this study at the large nondenominational church in Texas. I believe that this demonstrates a trend in evangelical Christianity to feel license to address cases of overt interpersonal violence – for example, domestic violence and human trafficking – as absolute evils contrary to Christianity and worthy of Christian efforts to eradicate them without feeling particular “political” in doing so. On the part of single mothers, they recognize that they benefit not at all from such violence, whereas the modicum of “benefit” or lack of direct, overt victimization they recognize themselves to experience when it comes to questions of class and our economic system, patriarchy, sexism, and racism may lead them to either not recognize the exigencies and realities of these problems or else feel them to be too political, too minor, or too selfish to pursue. Additionally, the rhetoric regarding “separation of church and state” iterated frequently in faith-based communities and the public sphere, without necessarily understanding fully what this means, combined with the evangelical suspicion of government involvement, leads many evangelical churches to eschew and discourage any efforts that involve entanglement with political forces, language of rights, and legislation. Finally, as Dr. Willie Peterson said, the great strides made for rights, justice, and liberation for people of color during the Civil Rights Movement and for women during the First and Second Waves of the Women’s Movement mask the ongoing inequities and suffering of single mothers and women of color, making it easy or tempting to assume that all true barricades to equality and thriving have been effectively eradicated and any current struggles or complaints are personal issues or unfounded.

In contrast, members of the Rural Women's Movement and other Christian activists I encountered in South Africa make telling the stories of involvement in struggles for justice by people like them a regular practice. Marshall Ganz has written at length about the power of storytelling – the replaying of histories of social activism – for mobilizing and sustaining engagement in social struggles. Ganz notes that the telling of these histories teaches us how to exercise agency to navigate unexpected challenges creatively and effectively, is a key means to our formation of collective and individual identities, cultures, and goals, and offers us resources to motivate our action.⁵³⁸ For evangelical Christian single mothers engaged in the Rural Women's Movement, their social action is not only a means of seeking rights for themselves but is a quest for the dignity and vitality of their very identity as South Africans and is, in addition, tied inextricably to their Christian identities, since their faith was birthed in distinctly South African forms. Thus, telling their histories of action reinforces their cultural identities and beliefs that the God who was with them in the struggle against apartheid is with them now to continue to fuel the indomitability of black South African culture. Furthermore, retelling their histories of action against apartheid or with the Rural Women's Movement reminds them that God authorizes them to continue to struggle against the power center and for their dignity and rights. It is this latter function of history-telling that might be most effective to mobilizing American evangelical single mothers and allowing them to form connections between their current

⁵³⁸ Ganz elucidates the power of story to authorize social action as the moral good in his paper *The Power of Story in Social Movements*:

Story telling is how we access the emotional – or moral – resources for the motivation to act on [approved] ends. Inherently normative, stories map positive and negative valence onto different kinds of behavior. They thus become what Charles Taylor calls our “moral sources” - sources of emotional learning we can access for courage, love, hope we need to deal with fear, loneliness, and despair that inhibits our action.

Marshall L. Ganz, “The Power of Story in Social Movements,” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Anaheim, CA, August, 2001), 2-3.

struggles and past social movements. I believe that one of the biggest hurdles to mobilizing social and political action in America amongst evangelical single mothers, at least ideologically speaking, is the feeling that they do not have divine “permission” to engage in such ventures. Recounting past Christian involvement in state and social affairs through movements and activism might awaken a sense that God indeed authorizes such action, that there is precedent for Christian involvement in social action.

Communitarianism

The logic of neoliberal capitalism hinges upon disconnection, where success, power, and benefits are obtained through competition, domination, privatization of rewards and punishments, and conformity to the power center. In “Taking Oppression Seriously,” Brita L. Gill-Austern argues that patterns of disconnection underlie most oppressions and exclusions, and these patterns create attitudes that we are not responsible for one another. Patterns of exclusion in our culture, such as individualism, privatization, and the atomization and revering of the nuclear family, reify this disconnect.⁵³⁹ A viable alternative, and one that single mothers are embodying – both as an explicit form of resistance, which we see in South Africa, and as a form of survival and support, as seen amongst American single mothers – is communitarianism. By forming communities of mutual aid amongst themselves, these female heads of household are, perhaps unintentionally, rejecting privatization, individualism, and the idealization of the nuclear family. In creating and transmitting counternarratives and theologies of responsibility for one another, single mothers and their allies might lead the charge in not only producing a religiously-

⁵³⁹ Brita L. Gill-Austern, “Taking Oppression Seriously,” *Injustice and the Care of Souls: Taking Oppression Seriously in Pastoral Care*, (Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 86.

authorized alternative ideology that challenges the hegemony of neoliberalism and patriarchy but also shaping an alternative culture whose successes and benefits can be demonstrated.

Furthermore, the Christian Church provides a prime ground for exercising and articulating new ideals that value relationship, responsibility, community, and an ethics of other-care over the privatization of suffering and sin that drive our current systems of oppression in society and economics.

Single mothers who are healthfully raising their children may represent a new paragon of self-giving love and communal reciprocity, which arguably could be described as “Christ-likeness,” in Christian terms, and they are forming communities of single mothers who model and encourage one another to model these same values. Communities of color in particular offer a template for potent, effective alternatives, and the two of the three women of color from the United States who participated in interviews for this project attested to the mitigating force of the non-nuclear models of social organization they experienced in their communities and churches. Ruth Corbett, founder of Single Mom’s Ministry at Emmanuel Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York, describes this very phenomenon:

It’s a family. It’s a place where folks come to be healed. They come to be comforted. They come for more than spiritual needs on Sunday morning. The church in the community of faith is there to support and enable other folks to be transformed and changed. If you are following what the scripture says, what Christ says, then you live in community. The church always has a role, especially in communities of color.⁵⁴⁰

Similarly, one interview participant who is not only a woman of color but also a pastor explains that community responsibility is the reason for the black community’s survival through their historical oppressions. Additionally, according to this participant, the notion of the nuclear

⁵⁴⁰ Angeli R. Rasbury, Mary Ignatius, and Rita Henley Jensen, “Single-Mom Ministries Expand Their Place in Church,” Women’s eNews, April 13, 2015, accessed February 10, 2017 <http://womensenews.org/2012/12/single-mom-ministries-expand-their-place-in-church/>

family is oftentimes felt to be obsolete or even counter to their values as communities of color and as Christians. Patricia Hill Collins writes extensively on this dynamic. According to Collins, African and African-American communities recognize that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be possible or best. Thus, in these communities, women (and men) become “othermothers” who assist biological mothers by sharing parental duties, and this role is, according to Collins, central to Black personhood and parenting.⁵⁴¹ Likewise, Valerie Lehr recognizes the potency of the example of communal care in African-American and African communities as a counternarrative to isolating and alienating social organizations like the nuclear family, which create true “single mothers” who parent alone. Lehr asserts that “the reality that many African-American children are successfully raised in single-parent families goes ignored. So, too, do the support systems within communities that have allowed for this success.”⁵⁴² Ignoring alternative systems of support in our metanarratives, civil society and culture, policies, and economic system is detrimental to all children, including children born into two-parent families who may benefit more from an extended and diverse support network rather than from the traditional privatization of the nuclear family.

Elevating these alternative social configurations and viable possibilities for the way we do life will challenge existing dominant modes of living and social organization. To change how we view single mothers and communities of color that embody communitarianism over individualism, it is valuable to connect embodied counternarratives lived out in these populations with powerful sources of culture, like religion. When religious narratives are articulated in

⁵⁴¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 165.

⁵⁴² Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values: Debunking the Myth of the Nuclear Family*, 113.

support of seemingly deviant or iconoclastic ways of living (be them social, economic, or political), these alternatives gain legitimacy and authority and become viable contenders to deconstruct the hegemony of a status quo that is accepted as the best possible option, though it may oppress or exclude many.

Patricia Hill Collins argues that if children interact with a diverse group of persons as they grow up, and if the community provides both exposure to role models and responsibility for supporting children, justifications for the necessity of the two-parent home lose power.⁵⁴³ Interestingly, the development of role models and communal responsibility for nurturance and growth can arguably be considered integral features of Christian teachings. By creating an ethics of mutual responsibility and care for children, institutional support of othermothering from Christian organizations and their messages would encourage communitarian accountability for all others and would spur a kind of fellow-feeling and solidarity when one community member or child is oppressed or at risk of suffering. This sense of personal connection to suffering and alienation would awaken more individuals to the blind spots and elitism of the systems that operate in our midst and would inspire action on behalf of those affected and afflicted, since we would have a greater sense of connection to and responsibility for them. As Lehr asserts, “Unless we reconstruct social narratives so that we value the active involvement of adults who are not parents in children’s lives, such relationships will remain small-scale experiments.”⁵⁴⁴

We see the effectiveness of social narratives that communicate the value of mutual responsibility and communal identity and well-being in the persistent work and impressive success of the Rural Women’s Movement, both in terms of their political and cultural change-

⁵⁴³ Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values: Debunking the Myth of the Nuclear Family*, 110.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid., 166.

making and gains and in terms of their survival and even thriving against dire and deadly straits. The South African values of *ubuntu* (common humanity, oneness, compassion, collective identity and mutual becoming) and *ilima* (working together) are invoked and redefined regularly by members of the Rural Women's Movement, as they remind each other of the historical role of communal responsibility in indigenous South African survival under apartheid and victory over this oppressive system and contribute new meaning and shape to these values in their present and shifting contexts. The repetition of these stories and the invocation of these values translate into actual communitarian social organization among rural communities of women, comprised of single mothers and "othermothers" whose well-being is bound with one another. For example, land-owning RWM members donate their land for communal gardens, community residents form civil patrols to protect women and girls against ukuthwala, RWM women create sewing cooperatives, and single mothers found community creches for village children. In the RWM, communitarianism is an ideal that, while not always practiced in their Christian churches, is generally regarded as a vital component of Christianity, as well as human survival.

Theorizing about the power of communitarianism to which the examples of RWM women attest, Jeffrey Weeks proposes that an ethics of communitarianism and *mutual* self-giving, including the requirement by single mothers – of whom *self-sacrifice* is constantly demanded – that the world and humans around them give of themselves and their excess to resource single mothers and their families. The point is not to recant the need for self-giving categorically but to first necessitate that this self-giving always be mutual and reciprocated and to also repudiate the idealization of self-sacrifice, as well as to reverse the stigma attached to self-care, pride, and personal boundaries and limits on the part of the single mother. This is a much-needed counternarrative to challenge and deconstruct the hegemony of individualism and

privatization that results in the alienation of many from power and thriving. In what he calls an “ethics of love,” Weeks says that “a responsibility for the self requires a responsibility to others, in a web of reciprocity.”⁵⁴⁵ Weeks’ ethics of love proposes that the actions we embody and live out ought to be guided by a commitment to mutual self-giving love and communal responsibility, meaning that one’s actions, decisions, and judgments are always deeply contextualized. Similarly, Lehr proposes that, if mutuality and equity were the basic ethics for relationships, relationships would necessarily value and entail responsiveness to one another’s articulated needs in this “web of reciprocity” and response. Thus, rather than basing relationship norms and virtues on formulaic standards and roles, new roles for humans, genders, and identities would constantly be negotiated and contextually and mutually determined. This ethics challenges the retention of old roles that no longer meet present needs or adhere to the ethics of love.⁵⁴⁶ Furthermore, such an ethics of relationships draws us into community, as our identities, roles, and performances are mutually determined and constantly fluctuating - being created anew amongst a community of equal care.

In addition to an ethics of communitarian relationships based on mutual self-care and self-giving and on contextualized responsiveness, Christians who embrace a postcolonial awareness of empire and imagine a different world must construct a theology of sex that is consistent with the shift I am proposing from the privatization and individualization of society, ethics, and religion to the commitment to communitarianism, interconnectedness, and a preferential option for marginalized voices. Kwok Pui-lan notes that certain strains of feminism

⁵⁴⁵ Jeffrey Weeks, *Invented Moralities: Sexual Values in an Age of Uncertainty*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 181-182.

⁵⁴⁶ Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values*, 73.

have proposed individualist sexualities and sexual freedom as the goal for the liberation of women but that this approach is born out of and supports a white bourgeois culture.⁵⁴⁷ These theories and rules do not always prove supportive or representative of the experiences of Christian single mothers. On the other hand, in Christian circles, evangelical theologies of sexual purity and abstinence do often argue for the communal or social repercussions of premarital sex – contending that to engage in sex before marriage and unplanned pregnancy invites suffering upon their children, compromises the testimony of the Church, and threatens the security of God’s blessing upon their families, churches, and nation. This narrative inflicts unjust shame and responsibility for personal and communal suffering of single mothers and fails to acknowledge the individual dignity and agency of women and their sexuality. In short, many liberal feminist approaches to sex and sexuality privilege the individual to the neglect of the communal and social, while most evangelical Christian views on sex and sexuality focus on the supposed communal effects of individual choices in damaging ways. Without attending to an ethics or theology of sex that is developed with single mothers in mind, we leave in place a cornerstone of the harmful metanarratives, the attempts at deconstruction of these metanarratives that ignore the perspectives and experiences of single mothers, and the rationale behind unjust and oppressive policies, practices, and systems that victimize female heads of household.

However, an alternative social ethics of sex is possible. Mario Costa, Catherine Keller, and Anna Mercedes propose the marriage of *eros* and *agape*, a fusion that, for them, signals the potential for a guiding ethics, which I believe can aptly be applied to sex. According to these theologians, *agape* refers to the reciprocal and cooperative love between God and creation, a love that is both material and political. Significantly, this *agape* is also initiative in that it elicits

⁵⁴⁷ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonialism Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 37.

or produces in creation a desire to reciprocate. Thus, when we engage in reciprocity of *agape* by extending this gift to those around us, we take the risk of initiating the transformation of broken relations, thus taking the risk of giving of one's self to another. As they assert, "To love life cannot be separated from a life that materially manifests such love; to love life cannot be separated from loving the other and giving of oneself to the other."⁵⁴⁸ Combined with *agape*, *eros*, as Costa, Keller, and Mercedes posit, is the force that pulls neighbors to one another, as we desire intimacy, thus driving us to identify with each other and love one another and self simultaneously in intimate coalition across difference and with the poor and the Other.⁵⁴⁹ This ethics rejects the reification of a morality code or set of rules and instead renders morality *relative* in the sense that decisions of ethicality are based upon "the neighborly interdependence of all creatures", responsiveness to contexts, and a consistent commitment to the promotion of the material and spiritual good of the Other.⁵⁵⁰

Citing Mark 12:29-31, in which Jesus urges his followers to love God with all their being and to love their neighbor as themselves, as Christ's key ethical teaching, Costa, Keller, and Mercedes argue that this text sets up a particular kind of love as responsive, reciprocal solidarity as a sort of hermeneutical lens for ethics, morality, and testing the goodness of decisions and systems.⁵⁵¹ According to this theology, our relationships and decisions, whether they be sexual, economic, or socio-political, ought to pull us into community and deep solidarity, to use Rieger's term, in which the burdens and struggles of the Other are recognized as being part and parcel to

⁵⁴⁸ Mario Costa, Catherine Keller, and Anna Mercedes, "Love in Times of Empire: Theopolitics Today," in *Evangelicals and Empire*, 299.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 302.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 296.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 293.

our own. This ethics emphasizes shared responsibility, as well as power-sharing and decision-making that is motivated by attentiveness to the needs of the Other and selfless self-giving seeking mutuality. In this case, sexual decisions would not merely be made with the desires of one partner predominating, nor with the good of just the two partners in mind, but rather with awareness of how the physical relationship is a manifestation of mutual self-giving that edifies the partners engagement with a wider community and its needs – and not to the neglect of the partners directly involved, either.

In addition theology of *agape-eros* love as the guiding principle for testing and formulating ethics, rooting sexual decisions and relationships, struggles, spirituality, and social-economic dynamics in community and interconnectedness, there are scholars who have done significant work to demonstrate the relevance not only of a hermeneutical or moral lens for contextual discernment but also of particular scriptural paradigms for non-individual, communal-based sex positivity. Theologians like Kwok Pui-lan offer several arguments as to how sexuality can be situated in community in a progressive and sex-positive manner that are based more directly on scriptural cases. According to Kwok, Jesus urges a communal “family” rather than one based on marriage or blood. As Kwok writes, Roman colonization of Palestine undermined Jewish men’s authority as heads of household because the heavy taxation on Jewish citizens produced emasculating financial hardship. Jesus spoke against abuses of power and economic exploitation, yet never in his mission to or speech about “setting the captives free” does Jesus advocate for either male familial headship or the nuclear family as the foundational and moral social building block. Instead, Jesus calls entire villages to form “familial” communities, based on Mosaic covenantal commandment, to provide the supportive functions that used to be

performed by the family.⁵⁵² Jesus shifts the focus of a struggling, oppressed people group from privatized, atomized social units, which would reinforce patriarchy and continue to victimize women, to communal, holistic solidarity and care, which promotes the equality, well-being, and liberation of all members.

Another biblical resource is found in the story of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, Ruth's sexuality is intimately related to Naomi's and her survival and is used for the preservation of family land and property rather than being depicted as a private matter.⁵⁵³ This story deprivatizes sexuality and places it within community, reminding us that the use of our sexuality has implications for our social, economic, class, power, and gender status. While this idea is used as a cautionary tale today in the hands of evangelical purity culture, we can employ the postcolonial concept of mimicry of this rhetoric or point in a way that exposes how the policing of this aspect of identity by the power center is used to justify the subjugation of women. In a constructive move, we can say that women's control of their sexuality is both grounds for community formation, as seen in Ruth's sexual action to ensure a place in the community for Naomi and herself, and rooted in community. Also, by exposing the communal, deprivatized nature of sexuality through its intersectionality, attending to the angles and implications of class, gender, marital status, race, nationality, and sexual orientation as they affect one's exercise of and repercussions for their sexuality, we can construct a mindfulness and ethics to guide our choices. However, we must be careful not to play to mystified notions of "what is best for the community," when these come in the form of dogmatisms and supposed axioms about propriety that have no real basis in natural or rational orders other than to protect and preserve the status

⁵⁵² Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 89.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, 107.

quo that benefits some to the exclusion of others. By creating contextualized and communal ethics of sex and sexuality, we might remain faithful to the aims of feminist political theology to promote the “survival, health, and well-being of the whole community intersectionally.”⁵⁵⁴

Significantly, these countertheologies are not merely being generated from within the academy but are being articulated and developed by women – including single mothers – who do not conform to and are victimized by the norms of empire. Several of the women in the Rural Women’s Movement articulated contextualized interpretations of the Bible and developed sexual ethics that promoted the well-being and dignity of the individual women, the community, and the movement of RWM. Additionally, some of the American single mothers voiced theologies of sex that contradicted the teachings of their evangelical communities. In the work of mobilizing evangelical single mothers for social activism, therefore, and in deconstructing harmful systems and narratives and setting forth workable alternatives, the primacy of mutual relationships and communitarian, responsive, contextual care seems to be a powerful moral standard for developing viable alternative systems and theologies. Identifying biblical passages and different, feminist, and postcolonial hermeneutics for scripture that privilege communitarian instead of nuclear, privatized family structures and concepts of sexuality may provide an effective heuristic for mobilizing organization and action among evangelical Christian single mothers.

Nondualism of the Spiritual and Material

Dualisms play a complex role in religion-as-culture-and-ideology and its intersection with neoliberal society. In speaking about single motherhood and sexuality in

⁵⁵⁴ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 150.

evangelical American Christianity, Sara Moslener identifies the uneven and insidious operation of dualisms in what she calls “religions of fear” and “religions of accommodation.” The former, asserts Moslener, seeks to demonstrate the gulf between the holy and the unholy, resting upon “absolute narratives of good and evil” and creating “absolute moral boundaries that mirror a larger cosmic battle.” These boundaries are mapped between the “sacred” and the “secular,” the Church and the world. On the other hand, religions of accommodation seek to dissolve boundaries between the sacred and secular so that they can be “culturally relevant” and culturally savvy, promoting moralities based on individual well-being. However, as Moslener argues, the purity movement of evangelical Christianity engages in both fear-mongering and accommodation:

The purity movement seeks to construct a moral economy, not simply a code of morality, in which the assurance of emotional, marital, and sexual fulfillment is provided in exchange for bodily control and spiritual obedience. In order for the economy to function, the purity movement relies upon the moral absolutism of the religion of fear while benefiting from the cultural and therapeutic permissions of the new paradigm...Sexual immorality leads to the emotional and spiritual apocalypse of the individual, a fate that separates the believer from God, casting one into emotional desolation and threatening one’s personal salvation.⁵⁵⁵

Thus, what we do in and with our bodies has deep spiritual implications in a great cosmic battle between good and evil. We see this in the purity narrative’s connection between sex, sin, and spiritual warfare, the assumption that single motherhood is a spiritual repercussion or consequence of sin, and the prosperity gospel’s belief that financial blessing is evidence of divine favor for personal holiness. While the latter is often rejected in American evangelical circles, middle-class comforts are regularly idealized in these churches through everything from conversations about tithing to assumptions about financial status made in program planning like

⁵⁵⁵ Sara Moslener, *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 158, 166.

mission trip fees for youth groups. Though many evangelical churches openly reject the prosperity gospel and may not explicitly endorse the middle class, poverty-shaming – framing poverty as a symptom of personal spiritual and moral failure or ignorance – is common. In such a way, there is an operable nondualism in American evangelical Christianity that focuses on the individual rather than the collective or systemic. Though individual choices are said to affect the material wellbeing of the collective Church or nation, it is less common in evangelical Christianity in the United States to identify how the collective choices of the Church or the nation are affecting the material wellbeing of the individual. In the latter case, a dichotomy exists between what is considered the political or the state and the individual or the private sphere.

To the women of RWM, that which is empowering to them in their daily lives and which contributes to their thriving in the quotidian is considered to be divine and endowed with positive spiritual power. Giving validity to counternarratives that empower women and gender equality, South African women are generating “incipient theologies,” theologies that they embody or live out, even as they are still developing the theoretical cogency and coherency of these beliefs. They embrace the notion that whatever is spiritual has – or ought to have – an active, physical, material component, so that belief must also be followed in action. Belief is an embodied concept. Conversely, their actions and lived experiences have profound impact on shaping the theologies and beliefs that drive further action. While RWM women may articulate theological beliefs that are seemingly conflicting or contradict choices they make that seem empowered and well-deliberated – such as actively participating in the Rural Women’s Movement and fighting the material struggles they encounter, despite sharing conflicting remarks about the sacredness of virginity and the sin of premarital sex, it appears as though the beliefs they share that carry the greatest weight when it comes to motivating their choices and activities correlate with their lived

experiences. Their material experiences drive survival strategies. It is significant that most of the RWM encountered for this project both experience the influence of RWM leader Sizani Ngubane and other RWM members, as well as the influence of their church pastors and fellow congregants. Often, the women report different and competing narratives from RWM and their churches. Yet they have chosen to pay heed to Ngubane's messages, which echo their lived experiences and have helped them to recognize that they were truly not benefiting from the extant systems and that there were indeed alternatives. Their success living out these counternarratives and taking part, as women of faith, in activism reinforces their beliefs that their resistance efforts are sacred acts, ordained and desired by their God, and that they are living in accordance with a better theology than that touted by many operative metanarratives.

Integrating the binary and dualistic categories of spiritual and material or private and public is essential to mobilizing religion as a culture that struggles for the holistic liberation of all. In order to do this, religion must reclaim and fully embrace an ideology of integration and interconnectedness. Moreover, though, the recognition of the operation of systems of thought, practice, and policy that dichotomize the spiritual and material, divine and human, religious and political, and private and public do more than just awaken us to the disconnection between spiritual wellbeing and holistic liberation and to one of the reasons behind both the impotence of and apparent allergy to Christian involvement in social movements. American single mothers in evangelical churches seemed to more readily acknowledge a nondualism when it came to equating premarital sex with what they deemed to be their personal material struggles. Where the dualism existed for them, though, was between their individual circumstances and the systemic or political. Three of the participants in the interviews strongly attested to the connection between the struggles of single mothers and systemic sin or injustice. The other participants'

responses in the interviews bore traces of challenge to the common evangelical elision of individual material struggle and personal sin; however, these hints of dissension with the dominant theological narratives have not yet been formalized into explicit counter-theologies or embodied in counter-practices. Their responses to interview questions and telling of their stories were not dissimilar from those of South African interview participants in that their responses to questions did not always display the kind of consistency lauded by systematic theology and logic; for example, their responses would bear contradictions as many of them asserted beliefs premarital sex being a sin but then voiced strongly in their personal narratives that getting pregnant and becoming single mothers was not only a divine and holy thing but a source of pride for them, in which they located God's operation in their lives and identified themselves as Christlike and selfless. The difference between American women's responses and South African women's is that the former did not necessarily have access to narratives that they found authoritative (namely, that used Christian theology in its arguments) that tied the personal to the political in a way that helped them recognize their struggles as caused by systemic rather than personal sin.

Awareness of the dualisms that operated in evangelical Christianities ought to also entail attentiveness to, as Joerg Rieger argues, the power differentials at play between the dualistic categories of our world and the social classes created by dualisms.⁵⁵⁶ Dualisms between the spiritual and material map themselves out on our society itself and its members, cutting up the global community into categories and classes that align more or less with the dualisms of sacred and profane, spiritual and physical, good and bad. These gradations and binaries not only interrupt the ties that bind us to one another but also form the basis on which power and benefit

⁵⁵⁶ Joerg Rieger, *Globalization and Theology*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 30-31.

is allocated. Yet, the effects and operation of these dualisms in fact constitute one of the very ties that bind us, for the vast majority of us find ourselves carved out of and cleaved onto the oppositional category of “Other“, located outside of the good, the sacred, the power center.

Grassroots Power

Rather than complying with norms and narratives of white supremacy, patriarchy, and neoliberal, religious, and social forms and forces of privatization, RWM gives significant – *sacred* – weight to cultural/material embodiments or enactments and ideologies of female empowerment, human dignity, African indigenous pride, and gender equality. Though these messages may contradict what they are told in their churches, RWM women have been able to accept and reconcile these counternarratives with their values because, in large part, indigenous South African expressions of Christianity do not commonly given full interpretational authority to local pastors, nor have indigenous South Africans felt it incumbent upon them to accept a single way of interpreting their Christianity. According to Sizani Ngubane’s retelling of South African history, at least amongst RWM members there is a common understanding that in pre-colonized and pre-apartheid South Africa, top-down forms of power were largely been eschewed by South African native culture, in favor of shared power or bottom-up power flows. It is significant that this is the historical memory preserved and perpetuated in the Rural Women’s Movement. However, as the narrative told by RWM members recounts, under apartheid, traditional councils were encouraged to take more decision-making power, resource-ownership, and control from their communities for themselves as individual males. Additionally, traditional councilmen were aligned with the Inkatha Freedom Party, which was secretly subsidized by the South African apartheid regime to attack ANC and other non-Inkatha members. Furthermore,

power was regularly asserted as and encouraged to take the shape of domination, force, and patriarchy, and Inkatha members on traditional councils were rewarded economically for this.⁵⁵⁷

To this day, many of these men and systems that recognize their power remain operative on traditional councils. However, the Rural Women's Movement persistently challenges this and has had success in returning power to the grassroots and restructuring traditional councils.

In the United States, the prominent narratives ostensibly focus on the individual, and in evangelical churches, theologies and ministries certainly do. However, the concept of collective grassroots power is often neglected by churches, and the elite class and power center typically attempt to ignore, stifle, or otherwise actively suppress both attempts at gathering and shows of collective grassroots power and agency. As Joerg Rieger writes in *Globalization and Theology*, “[Top]-down hard power uses every available means to assimilate cultural and religious images and to erase real alternatives.”⁵⁵⁸ Rieger identifies theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jon Sobrino, Leonardo Boff, and John Wesley as those who recognized and challenged this operation of top-down hard power – power as domination, as I have termed it in this work. Of additional note is that these theologians also eschewed what Rieger refers to as “soft power,” the equivalent in of the metanarrative's valorization of the middle class; that is, soft power touts that the “solution” to poverty, oppression, and suffering is to elevate the subaltern or underclass to the status of the elite – or at least the proximal replication of and conformity to the values of the elite class. Instead, Wesley, Sobrino, Boff, and Bonhoeffer assert that a religion that follows the example of Jesus Christ and of God throughout history “starts from the bottom up.”⁵⁵⁹ A bottom-

⁵⁵⁷ Reed Kramer, “Apartheid Leadership Linked to ‘Hit Squad,’” *The Washington Post*, June 12, 1997, accessed July 14, 2019, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/africa/june/12/trc.htm?noredirect=on>

⁵⁵⁸ Joerg Rieger, *Globalization and Theology*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 17.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., 44-45.

up form of power does not just aspire to the standards and benefits shared by the elite class and their utilization of power as domination but embraces an entirely different kind of power. This is the main thrust of theologies of liberation – that power looks like the ability to assert and carry out collectively and communally a will for the mutual, shared, and equal thriving of all people, as well as the liberation of all people from forces of harm and oppression. This power is about assertion rather than domination and coercion. It finds its strength and authorization from a concept of God that differs from that of many American doctrines of God that hinge upon a notion of omnipotence. Instead, theologies of liberation, writes Rieger, "find God on the margins, where Godself is struggling with the people for their liberation and a better life. The globalizing thrust that emerges from this observation moves from the bottom-up, rather than from the top down."⁵⁶⁰

Single-parent ministries could be a site for the formation of grassroots, bottom-up forms of power in that they provide a site for gathering as single mothers to voice their shared struggles and to formulate theologies from their own perspective. Additionally, they potentially could provide opportunities for participants to be leaders in a public fashion. Among the American women who participated in interviews for this project, over half of them participated in or led groups for single mothers. They told stories of these groups being supportive networks and, for the most part, safe spaces, as well as occasional resources for material support. Some of the interview participants mentioned the power of shaping cultural and spiritual values in their church community and single-parent ministry that comes with having single mothers in leadership. They also attested to the healing power of relating to other female heads of household. However, the template of power as flowing from the top-down was not frequently

⁵⁶⁰ Joerg Rieger, *Globalization and Theology*, 48.

contested among them, a trend that seems to correlate with the apparent lack of strong challenges, generated within single-mother ministries, to systems of power and their attendant teachings and practices. Obedience to authority was often cited as a value and disobedience as the cause of suffering. This is where the power of counternarratives can play a significant role in licensing and mobilizing American Christian single mothers to note the potential for power within these spaces: by introducing through theology alternative concepts of power and the possibility for political action to be righteous action, American single mothers might find that the dominant patriarchal and neoliberal systems and metanarratives of top-down power are in fact not divinely sanctioned and thus do not deserve their consent or the hegemony these systems hold.

The Rural Women's Movement has served as just such a site of grassroots power and opportunity for single mothers, many of whom did not feel themselves worthy of voicing their struggles until they realized their experiences were shared by all and thus part of a systemic rather than personal failure. Additionally, through RWM, many single mothers discovered their ability to lead, speak publicly, advocate, and create significant change. Thus, it is essential in any movement for single mothers' rights to begin the work at the grassroots and engage ordinary and local women as leaders. John Wesley appointed uneducated, ordinary workers and women as preachers, demonstrating, Rieger asserts, that "[engaging] those on the bottom of society, therefore, becomes a 'channel' of God's grace, a way in which God engages the church and transforms it."⁵⁶¹ Similarly, as Frances Moore Lappé writes, "[Our] planet's problems are complex, pervasive, and interconnected, [and cannot] be addressed from the top down. Solutions

⁵⁶¹ Joerg Rieger, *Globalization and Theology*, 45.

depend on the insights, experience, and ingenuity of people most affected – all thwarted when citizens are cut out and manipulated, and when decisions get made secretly by the few.”⁵⁶²

Single mothers, as those most affected by our planet’s problems, do indeed offer solutions, both embodied and articulated, and are the appropriate groups with whom to engage, equip, and empower for bottom-up, grassroots power shifts and social change.

Embracing Ambivalence and Engaging Contestation

The development of theologies that encourage activism, women’s rights, and a different sexual and moral ethic than those that vilify single motherhood is vital to the mobilization of Christian single mothers for their rights. Such theologies may serve as deconstructive counternarratives to challenge the singular ideal of the nuclear family, of privatization, and of neoliberalism. Choice – in this case, having the ability to hear and choose between a plurality of Christian theologies – is empowering; lack of choice is paralyzing and urges conformity, with dire results for those who dare to be iconoclastic. Amongst some American evangelical communities, the belief that there is a singular correct biblical interpretation, determined and mediated by religious authorities, is a popular dogma. Both the broader culture and the narrow range of “acceptable” theologies and biblical interpretations in American evangelical Christianity often corroborate the propriety of privatization, atomized nuclear families, male headship, and neoliberalism, and further entrench hierarchical, unequal, and top-down flows of power. The introduction of counternarratives utilizing the biblical text to contest these constructs may prove a powerful resource for single mothers’ recognition of systemic sin, their victimization by this

⁵⁶² Frances Moore Lappé, “Getting a Grip,” *Courage to Think Differently*, ed. George S. Johnson, (Cambridge, MN: Adventure Books, 2013), 78.

sin, and the propriety of their collective social action and embodiment of resistance and alternatives.

In studying the communities formed by single mothers in the United States and South Africa, their stories bring to light an oppression lurking in our midst: a shockingly large number of women and children are absorbed into the very spaces that oppress them. These families are accepted as charity cases or cautionary tales and granted just enough scraps from the table of economic, religious, and social benefits that they feel they are neither worthy of a collective identity nor “bad enough” off to warrant a collective identity. Even amongst those in South Africa who have formed a collective identity for political action, a lingering shame exists due to the persistent narratives of the Christian propriety of the nuclear family. The impact of these theologies can make even the staunchest supporter of women’s rights question whether the spiritual and ecclesial realms might be the one space where she deserves a lesser status for raising her children outside of marriage. History has demonstrated, though, that utilizing religion as a substantiation for both extant systems and ideas as well as divergent and oppositional narratives and constructs is highly effective. In his work “Remember the Poor,” Joerg Rieger says that theology and the Christian church tend to attempt to do one of two things with the marginalized. Either they seek to elevate the oppressed to positions of authority and power within their churches and systems in ways that support or conform to the status quo, or they make them recipients of charity and well-meaning support from those better off.⁵⁶³ Both of these efforts can be seen in the testimonies of participants in this project’s study, as they spoke of churches who employed people such as Jennifer Maggio in positions of leadership and as they

⁵⁶³ Joerg Rieger, “Remember the Poor,” *Courage to Think Differently*, ed. George S. Johnson, (Cambridge, MN: Adventure Books, 2013), 144-145.

spoke of the single parents' ministries and one-off acts of kindness extended to single mothers by their churches. The problem with this, as Rieger writes, is that both of these efforts attempt to integrate single mothers, deemed merely "improper" and thus reform-able according to South African theologian Gerald West, into existing theological and social frameworks – frameworks that might be non-ideal, oppressive, and alienating.⁵⁶⁴

These frameworks, however, are not the only possibilities, nor are they the best of all options. This sort of "binary logic", writes Rieger, begs to be broken by encounters with the margins, which call for new theological categories and paradigm shifts.⁵⁶⁵ Instead, we need alternatives and difference that challenge the systems and structures that produce power differentials and oppression to begin with. Rieger notes that in I Corinthians 12, Paul depicts the church as the body of Christ in which power does not destroy difference as top-down power attempts to do, but this body of Christ also elevates the "inferior" member above the "superior" member, directly challenging the flow of power prominent in empire and in churches that descend from empire.⁵⁶⁶

Remarkably, the development of new roles and counternarratives or theologies can be seen in both groups because these women are living out the dissonance between existing moralities or roles and the needs that they actually have. As many theologians have noted, new theologies and new practices emerge in the interstitial space between life and death, the places of pressure. In South Africa predominantly, single mothers are contesting through social and political activism laws and cultural practices that do not meet their needs as black South African

⁵⁶⁴ Joerg Rieger, "Remember the Poor," 145.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid., 146.

⁵⁶⁶ Joerg Rieger, *Globalization and Theology*, 19.

rural women, unmarried mothers, and Christians. In both cases, unmarried mothers are either implicitly or explicitly challenging systems and messages of privatization and patriarchy that have become part of dominant religious, national, and ideological rhetoric because these narratives and practices are not coherent with their needs and experiences. Instead, they adopt an alternative ethics that they find within their faith traditions, their identities as women and mothers, and, in the case of the Rural Women's Movement, their South African history and culture that celebrates the self-giving love they show to their children and one another and that encourages the communitarianism and egalitarianism that they need to survive. In other words, they find liberation from shame in embracing mutuality and other-care as the basis of their moral codes and their interpretations of the Christian gospel and its deontology. Thus, the communities organized by single mothers, their strategies for survival, and their alternative theologies and concepts of family, morality, and womanhood are produced as they process through the dissonance between what they are experiencing as good and harmful in their daily lives. These practical and narrative experiences constitute powerful proof that alternatives to the current patriarchal, classist, and racist systems are both vital and possible.

Last Thoughts

In the Rural Women's Movement and among other evangelicals involved in progressive social movements, the values of communitarianism, grassroots and bottom-up flows of power, the absence of dualistic constructs that divide the spiritual and the material, and the embrace of ambivalence and contestation as permissible and innate to their Christianity and culture have created a persistent alternative operation of religion as ideology and culture that runs contrary to mainstream and oppressive operations of religion as ideology and culture. I believe that in the

United States, the religion explicitly embraced by evangelical unmarried mothers still retains enough verisimilitude to the patriarchal and neoliberal evangelicalism of empire that this becomes a hurdle to collective consciousness of their victimization at the hands of systemic sin and the possibility of collective action to challenge these systems and work for their rights. There is already a strong contingency of evangelical Christians throughout South African history who have engaged in resistance to empire – including (and especially relevant for this project) a current thriving social movement of evangelical single mothers striving for their rights. Perhaps their examples can connect with American evangelical single mothers in such a way that South African Christian activists and single mothers can lead the latter to imagine a counter-religion whose ideology and culture do not have to conform to the metanarrative.

The persistence of alterity and oppression in our world at the hands of globalization begs for an alternative, a way of recognizing our universal interconnectedness that does not bind us together in a market in which we are either owner, consumer, laborer, or commodity. Joerg Rieger addresses a theology of globalization from the bottom-up that recognizes and challenges top-down globalization. Rieger asserts that the Bible presents us with the challenge to rethink the image of God through the person of Jesus Christ as one who took the side of the grassroots and subaltern to bring together the global masses who suffer at the hands of top-down power as domination throughout history.⁵⁶⁷ We have in hand, then, a theology of alternative globalization of the grassroots, the suffering at the hands of empire that might be much more widespread than we have been led to think. This project contends that as resistance to empire is formed, it must move in such a way that single mothers are engaged in and benefitting from the resistance and any resulting shifts created. I believe that it is crucial to find a way to follow the leads of single

⁵⁶⁷ Joerg Rieger, *Globalization and Theology*, 17.

mothers, the "inferior member," the "improper Christian," and we must find a way to mobilize them. To locate the leaders of this potential movement not just among single mothers but in a group of powerful women of color who are heads of impoverished households in the United States and in the Two-Thirds World is a strong challenge to top-down power flows. But first, the stories of South African Christian single mothers and activists must be shared with American Christian single mothers, and the stories of both groups of women must be allowed to talk back and forth, to engage in dialogical imagination in order to create new options and authorize these theologically with counternarratives to destabilize and deconstruct hegemony and construct new ways of living liberated in this world. This, then, is the importance of this cross-cultural, transnational project.

This project seeks to bring to light the experiences of a demographic present in every geographic space that, by the numbers, fares amongst the worst in terms of financial and social support. Yet while social movements have developed to further the interests of other marginalized and struggling groups, little visible activism has by and for single mothers has emerged. Given both the historical advocacy and involvement of Christians in social justice and liberation causes and movements, as well as the deployment of religious rhetoric and argumentation in the development of metanarratives that create the marginalization of single mothers, it is fair to say that Christianity is a potent tool both for hegemony and for resistance, liberation, and counternarratives. It has been my goal to explore the firsthand accounts of unmarried mothers within Christian communities to see how they have been affected by religious metanarratives concerning sex, morality and sin, and the nuclear family. The hope is that, in so doing, we may uncover potential alternative theologies and subcultural constructs that could provide evidence of the plausibility of different ideologies, cultures, and systems that might

better and more equally distribute power and liberate those who are oppressed. Furthermore, I have hoped to gain insight into the origins and agendas behind the glorification of the nuclear family and, correlatively, the evolution of the victimization of single mothers, with an eye to who is benefiting from these metanarratives. Finally, this project seeks to investigate how some Christian single mothers – in this study, those in South Africa – have in fact organized for social action and what resources others may draw upon to follow suit.

A main point that I believe rises from this research and these case studies is that *there are alternatives*. There are alternatives to the current socioeconomic system and even alternative ways to “do” capitalism. There are alternative ways to organize socially and to support children and adults in structures that perform the same function and provide the same care and provision as families. There are alternative ways to conceive of and apply power, to make decisions, and to distribute and manage resources other than the top-down flows of power, the privatized monopoly of resource-owning and decision-making, and the conception of power as domination, all of which privilege certain men of elite classes and predominantly white, Western cultures to the neglect of other genders, classes, races, and nationalities. There are alternative ways to perform gender and gender relations; men and women do not have to be paired together in complementary relationships, nor do the gender identities have set rules and roles to which they must adhere, either independent of one another or in relationship to each other. There are alternative ways to interpret Scripture and formulate theologies that contradict mainstream, dominant discourses in Christianity – and these alternatives promise that there are multiple ways to conceive of sin, morality, sexual ethics, family, power, and gender roles and relations, as well as of love, Christ-likeness, holiness, and ethics in general. These alternatives beg to be taken seriously. In the course of history, it has been the alternative voices, the counternarratives, often

arising from the margins of society, that have powerfully challenged the blind spots, injustices, and inequities perpetrated by the power center and its metanarratives.

All of these alternatives require the reclaiming of interconnectedness, over and against the privatization and logics of disconnection that are laden in our ironically-labeled “connected and globalized” neoliberal world and in our attendant Christianities. The alternatives that give life and liberation to the masses, with a preferential option for the subaltern, must be based on mutual relationship. That is, to remedy the brokenness and produce real change, we must yearn for, look for, and create alternatives – or, rather, allow single mothers to lead the way into this work. These alternatives must restore our connections and equality, contra the logic of division, hierarchy, and domination latent in the extant systems and supporting theologies that victimize unmarried mothers and so many other demographics. This project has revealed that the presence of either of two value systems or commitments is a linchpin in determining whether or not Christian single mothers feel engaged, equipped, and empowered to assert their agency collectively over and against oppressive forces. Where privatization-and-disconnect is operative, top-down power, dualisms, strong urging to conform with “authorized” beliefs and norms, and structures – both ideological and political – that focus on the individual to the neglect of relationality, the system, or the community are present and pervasive. In these societies and spaces, fewer members feel that injustice is at play in their perceived benefit or lack thereof in the operating cultural, political, and ideological systems, and members are more likely to feel themselves responsible and thus proud of or guilty for any perceived benefit or suffering since these societies and spaces emphasize individual responsibility in what is purported to be a system that rewards effort, obedience to the system and to authority, and personal morality. In other words, in a “privatized” system in which the logic of neoliberalism pervades our social structures

and religions, our suffering and celebrations are supposedly individually determined. The path to success, then, is not collective action but individual conformity. On the other hand, where communitarianism-and-interconnectedness is a strong value, Christian single mothers feel connected to one another and to their cultural histories of action, promote an ethics of other-care and mutual love as the litmus test for righteousness, and thus are equipped to identify as evil beliefs, practices, and policies that victimize those who display other-care and mutual love.

As we put Christian single mothers from these two different spaces into conversation with one another, though, strengthening their relationship to one another, we engage in a creative interaction, honoring a connection and relationship that is pregnant with power from the margins that can deconstruct the lies of empire with embodied, incipient, and articulated theologies alike. Catherine Keller attests to the empire-resisting role of alternative theologies and counternarratives produced at the margins, many of which look like alternative practices and activism – understood as sacred and theological, even if they are not orthodoxically pronounced:

The apostle Paul warned of those who “exchanged the truth about God for a lie” (Romans 1:25). But such a lie is so good because it looks and sounds like the truth. The exchange can happen under cover of theology itself! Such spiritual dishonesty will not be answered by a wimp-out relativism...It was answered in this case by a spontaneous and confident *counter-truth*. The capacity to speak truth – sometimes to power, sometimes to the disempowered – is what in the religious traditions we mean by “witness” or “testimony.”⁵⁶⁸

The history of the Christian faith is an epic story of central, accepted discourses grappling with strong voices and examples from the subaltern and the marginalized – as we see in the Reformation, the formation of denominations, the Second Great Awakening and Social Gospel Movement, and, in more modern times, the anti-apartheid movement, the rise of liberation theology in Central and South America and in Africa and Asia, and the Civil Rights Movement.

⁵⁶⁸ Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 13.

It seems to be in the nature of this faith tradition for diversity, plurality, and ambivalence to thrive and to contest dominant strains of the faith. The resulting wrestling that this produces appears to be a recurring – and productive – feature of the development of the Christian faith in a global context. However, as this wrestling takes place, there have always been simultaneous efforts to silence the struggle and dialogue and to urge homogeneity of belief and practice. Often, these attempts to silence contending voices or co-opt them into the status quo takes the form of making superficial efforts and changes while leaving the systems, norms, and flows of power fundamentally the same.

It is vital that Christian communities recognize that unmarried mothers constitute a real demographic deserving of a collective identity – not as “improper Christians” in need of reformation and redemption by marriage (either to God or to a male spouse) but rather as a bona fide identity group that experiences similar struggles, has a particular culture that they have developed to survive and nurture their children, and shares a common experience of having the conditions that create their identity ignored or diminished. Single mothers deserve to be proudly recognized as a collective group, a demographic that warrants attention. This attention ought not to merely take the shape of churches forming programs and spaces for them to gather or receive emotional support, though this is necessary, but should also include a new attentiveness to how systems in our world have been built to alienate and marginalize single mothers as aberrations that challenge patriarchy’s thriving. Furthermore, it should entail the creation of space – perhaps through the divesting of power from those ordinarily privileged and benefiting in the extant systems – for single mothers to have access to the means to lead and create change. And we must be willing to listen and to follow.

Furthermore, the demographic of female-headed households begs for new theological attention. Just as liberation theology has urged us to “do theology” from the perspective of the poor, as black theology constructs theologies from the black experience, and as postcolonial theology has encouraged a subaltern theology, the world may benefit from theology done from the perspective of unmarried mothers who themselves are redefining ethics and family based on their experiences, their knowledge, and their needs. What seems to be needed, given the testimonies of the women involved in this study, is a theology, rooted in the contexts and struggles of this world, that begins not with ontological suppositions about the Divine but instead with single mothers’ experiences of and inter/actions with what they perceive as God or the Divine in this world. Rather than beginning with ontology or tradition, the counternarratives voiced by many women in the interviews and embodied by South African activists begin with experience and often run contrary to the theologies they may echo that have been formulated by their churches’ traditions. Mobilization of religion that can strongly contend with oppressive but popular metanarratives – in this case, for the sake of the liberation and empowerment of single mothers and their families – depends upon that place or moment of paradoxical encounter in which the single mother, struggling against multiple oppressions and within an experience unique to her but not foreign to other female heads of household, receives love that expresses not mere acceptance of or mercy toward her but pride in her fortitude and faith. It is the moment when she enjoys the mutuality of companionship rather than the humiliation of condescension or catches a glimpse into the absurdity and injustice of “reality” that the falsehood of the metanarrative is irrupted open by the Real.⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁶⁹ Joerg Rieger, *Remember the Poor: The Challenge to Theology in the Twenty-First Century*, (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998.)

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